

External Institutional Evaluation
University of the Arts – Târgu Mureș

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

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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. The specialized institutions, such as art schools, had to comply with these reforms, along with the other higher education institutions. After an initial period characterized by legislative void, 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 set up in 1993 to grant a first round of accreditation, to well established institutions as well as new ones. In 2005 ARACIS-Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education replaced CNEAA

In its report on the evaluation of ARACIS¹, 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 [...] invite various policy responses [.....] 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.

This is the background to the evaluation (18-20 November 2009) of the University of the Arts in Târgu Mureş and to this foreign expert report based on the detailed descriptive self evaluation report and on interviews with staff and students on site.

¹ EUA, EUA Audit of ARACIS, 2008

The University of the Arts in Târgu Mureş - UAT

Past developments

As well expressed in UAT's self evaluation report "the present structure of the university has been shaped by the flux and rhythm of successive mutations that have occurred in educational culture since the middle of the previous century". Since UAT was founded, in 1946, this has meant:

- changes of location between Cluj and Târgu Mureş, and even Bucureşti for the Romanian section for a few years;
- several changes of target population from Hungarian minority to both Hungarian and Romanian ethnic groups;
- changes of overseeing authority from the Ministry of Culture to the *Caragiale Institute of Theatre and Cinematographic Art* for one section for a few years, to the Ministry of Education;
- accompanied by changes of official names, the current name having been adopted just one month prior to this evaluation.

In addition the level of funding, even from the public purse, has fluctuated. Presently public funds account for approximately two thirds of UAT's financial resources; the other third comes from own resources and grants some of which have been interrupted, pending the resolution of the current government crisis.

During the 1970s and 1980s political decisions imposed drastic reductions on the institution, to the point that in 1989 only 24 students were enrolled.

Considering these turbulent past decades it is remarkable that UAT was able to continue existing, training excellent performers and has renewed with expansion.

UAT Today

UAT presents an unusual profile: an autonomous public institution with university status, enrolling 300 students in 2009-2010 in one of two faculties – theatre or music – in one of two sections - Hungarian or Romanian – in one of three levels – bachelor, master or doctorate. This complex, three dimensional structure is the result of historical developments. It seems cumbersome and probably makes management and planning more difficult. In spite of these almost centrifugal forces, UAT has succeeded in creating a sense of unity.

In fact ***one of the striking features is the relaxed convivial atmosphere that pervades the institution, with a strong sense of ownership on the part of all its members.*** Of course it is easier to establish positive informal relationships between students and teachers when most classes are small, often including 10 students or less. But small numbers are not the only reason. The nature of UAT art students, independent thinking and outspoken, plays an important part in the atmosphere. The willingness of all the staff to give their time and

attention, besides their knowledge, is certainly a major factor; the students acknowledge and appreciate their teachers' dedication. Whatever the reasons, ***the positive atmosphere is certainly one of UAT's strengths, which should be treasured and nurtured.***

The ***institution's small size*** not only fosters good relationships among staff and students it also ***allows adaptation to changes more quickly***, as the recent rapid expansion shows. ***However***, while the small size definitely has advantages, it also has drawbacks: first, limited political weight. Then, because it is easy to communicate with other individuals and settle whatever issue may arise, ***institutional group actions remain limited***. In part at least this may account for the absence of student union, and the limited internationalization strategy.

UAT exhibits a high degree of openness and transparency. The self evaluation report is quite detailed with a large number of annexes providing all necessary information. Many of these documents can be found on UAT's website which is quite informative but perhaps a little too passive. Thus one can only ***compliment UAT for the renovation of the website*** currently underway; the process aims at creating an interactive website. ***To increase its visibility*** beyond Romanian and Hungarian speaking communities, ***UAT should consider establishing an English version of the website***, with the same interactivity.

Structure and services

Obviously UAT has taken great care to implement guidelines – or requirements – included in the law regarding a university structure and the necessary components. Thus at least ten commissions preside over the various activities. While the commissions' responsibilities must be carried – it is essential to evaluate and assure quality, to oversee scientific research, etc. - ***one wonders whether an institution this size can afford this number of commissions.*** Besides, the organization chart does not fully reflect the various responsibilities carried out at UAT; to reflect reality ***the organization chart should show*** the commissions' activities and ***where in the organization falls, for example, responsibility for research*** – under the authority of the Chancellor? If not who? -, ***for doctoral students, for international activities.*** Should some of these commissions be combined? An optimal balance must be found between meeting all individual requirements and retaining a workable structure. ***In the process it is important to avoid increasing a creeping bureaucracy.*** As the *Living Manifest for Higher Arts Education*² states “at the end of the day Higher Arts Education is not about degrees and formal qualifications, it is about nurturing talent and creativity”.

Student services seem generally adequate. However it appears that both curricular content and library offerings need updating. Teachers have expressed their intention to proceed in this direction, which could very well fit in a consolidation phase to follow the recent expansion. Housing facilities are excellent but still in insufficient number; it is hoped that extension can be considered in the future if funding becomes available, or that additional

² *Living Manifest for Higher Arts Education, 2003,*
www.elia-artschools.org/downloads/activities/livingmanifest.doc

arrangements with the other Targu Mures universities can be found. UAT offers an adequate dining setting. However students complained that in the latter prices are higher than in standard coffee shops or cafeterias outside. One understands that the only possibility to provide meals for the students was to outsource this service to a caterer, after proper call for tender, and that this implies a number of additional incidental costs. Still it seems unfair that students should pay more onsite than outside. UAT is encouraged to look for possible approaches to reduce the cost to students: renegotiating contracts, securing financial support from the community, etc.

Aside from this complaint, *students expressed legitimate pride at being part of an excellent education institution*, while acknowledging areas that could be improved, and high esteem, even gratitude, towards their teachers whom they view as mentors. As mentioned above, the small size of the institution and the excellent relationships between staff and students mean that most issues can be easily solved and there is no felt need for a student union. Yet *a union could help the students deal with institution wide issues more effectively, and could facilitate contacts with other students in Romania and abroad.*

In terms of facilities, UAT is fortunate to have its own theatre and in the near future its own puppet theatre, making it one of the rare art institutions in Europe (the only one in Romania) to be so well equipped with facilities for performance.

Relations with international and local environment

Long before Romania joined the European Union, UAT had started establishing *international contacts*, particularly with Hungary: student exchanges, grants awarded by Hungarian organizations. In fact its sphere of influence laid mostly in Hungary and Romania. In recent years, contacts with other countries have greatly increased, in particular with visiting professors and the organization of international events. *UAT must be complimented for its dynamic activities.* However the institution would benefit from further developing its international strategy in order to increase international activities and visibility. Renovation of the website as planned, if possible with an English version, represents a major step in this direction. At UAT it seems that international involvement often results from individual initiatives. These could, and should, be pursued; but an institutional approach may be lacking, or could be intensified. *It is recommended that UAT joins an international art institutions association*, such as the European League of Institutes of the Arts. Membership in such an organization would provide a vehicle for visibility and a forum to share views on common problems. Already in 2003 Henrik Karlsson³ noted that “At the same time as providing high level education, arts schools are expected to play a fundamental role in the cultural life of society and, increasingly, in the economy. Furthermore, governments are looking at the organisation of higher education and its funding. In this context, arts institutions, whether autonomous or part of larger institutions, need to be open to reflection and review”.

At local level UAT collaborates with theatres, which gives students internships opportunities, and with the University Petru Maior on subjects of common interest. *Collaboration*

³ Henrik Karlsson, 2003, conference proceedings *Managing Art Schools Today*, OECD

agreements such as these can only benefit both parties; they *should be pursued and extended to other segments of the local community whenever possible.*

Bologna Process

As for most institutions everywhere, *the implementation of the Bologna Process has raised a number of issues.* It appears that at national level insufficient analysis of the impact of the Bologna Process at various levels of higher education preceded its adoption, so that proper adaptation could be devised. *The validity of the first 3-year degree is in doubt* “How can you train an actor or a musician in 3 years?”, in part because of the “shortened” duration of the training period but also because the restructuring of the academic programmes does not allow all the practice training believed to be necessary. This could be the result of narrow interpretation of the Bologna Process guidelines, whether at national or institutional level is not known. At any rate, the academic community now feels constrained by requirements thought to be inappropriate for an art institution. The *Living Manifest for Higher Arts Education* reminds us that “The primary purpose is the quality of performance and artistic activity in our institutions and programmes and that the real ‘products’ of artistic education are the musicians, dancers, designers, sculptors, painters, actors and filmmakers”.

Another issue concerns the doctorate in the art disciplines, in terms of qualification level required for teaching and in terms of degree content.

Professors in HEIs need to have a doctorate. In art institutions this requirement rules out hiring well known artists as “professors” as a doctorate was usually not part of their training up to now. Employing them at a lower level is unacceptable to them and has negative consequences on funding. Several countries (Hungary, United Kingdom to name just two) adopted a *practical solution: high level artists who meet a number of explicit criteria are granted a doctorate equivalent for their achievements, a sort of professional doctorate.* There are indications that this practice is spreading in Romania too. It is hoped that it is becoming official so that institutions can comfortably operate within the legal framework.

For an institution one of the requirements to be accredited as a university is to offer doctoral education. This has funding as well as educational consequences. A doctorate implies research, often thought of as scientific research which is difficult to define for the arts, particularly performing arts. Henrik Karlsson observed that “Issues related to the development of an artistic research paradigm are shared by all art schools and branches, particularly when it comes to the practical contribution to doctoral theses (or degree projects), regardless of whether it is a matter of artefacts, performance, exhibitions, demonstrations, prototypes, plans, etc.”, and in the same conference Ellen Hazelkorn concurred “Today, debate about the role and definition of research within art schools is beginning to take centre stage”. Six years later, an appropriate analysis of what doctoral education entails in the arts remains to be fully developed. In the meantime, *UAT, probably like other arts institutions, struggles with pragmatic temporary solutions,* e.g. crediting original theatrical productions to doctoral level. This is not satisfactory in the long run, *however a better definition implies that adequate guidelines are devised at national level.*

It seems essential that reflection groups be set up to analyse how the Bologna Process can be implemented for the benefit of arts institutions, and that UAT joins this approach. Such reflection groups certainly at European level within international organizations.

Looking ahead

The current situation remains highly challenging. *UAT has proven to be a dynamic proactive institution*, with a remarkable rate of expansion both in size and educational offerings during the last decade. However caution is in order now: it may not be possible to maintain the pace of expansion and keep developments under control at the same time. It *is now time to consolidate the recent developments*. In the future, *care should be taken that further expansion*, whether in size or in course offering, *fits well in the institution long term strategic development plan*. One option to consider will be to identify a specialization that would represent a niche not only in Romania but also in Eastern and Southern Europe and then to concentrate development efforts in this area. At the same time it is essential to avoid complicating the structure, but rather to steer towards a more integrated structure. These considerations will all be part of a carefully developed, and periodically revised strategic development plan.

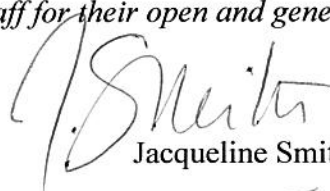
Conclusion

The University of The Arts in Targu Mures has lived through very turbulent decades. It is remarkable that against so many odds in terms of past constraints, economic and political context, UAT has managed to develop its own identity, create an institution spirit among its community and achieve a high reputation in the country and beyond. This is a tribute to its various leaders, and it bodes well for the future. However, art institutions “ all share the need to respond to a common set of characteristics and emerging trends of our age, inter alia globalization and internationalization; changing demographics and enrolment patterns; technological revolution; stricter regulatory environment; new educational sites and formats; changing nature of the workplace⁴” therefore they will have to maintain a proactive strategy and be ready to adapt.

A number of observations and suggestions have been developed in this report. They can be summarized as follows: UAT provides a high level art education and has proven its capacity to adapt to changing environment; it must now take time to consolidate its recent expansion, maintain its focus on quality, capitalize on its strengths, consider what options a long term development should include. It will thus remain a model institution for art education.

On a personal note I would like to thank ARACIS for inviting me to take part in the evaluation of this most interesting institution.

And I wish to express my profound gratitude to UAT community, its Rector, President, Chancellor, Professors, students and all the staff for their open and generous hospitality. I formulate wishes for a very successful future.



Jacqueline Smith, 27 November 2009

⁴ Ellen Hazelkorn, 2003, *Models of Art School Organization*,

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