



External Institutional Evaluation
University of Agronomic Sciences
and Veterinary Medicine in Bucharest

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. 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..”. To these challenges should be added the current dire economic situation which limits higher education resources and leads to brain drain.

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. Joining the European Union, in 2007, has opened new opportunities in particular for research grants.

As part of its mission of accreditation and quality assurance in this challenging environment, ARACIS undertook the external evaluations of public and private institutions of higher education. Recognizing the positive impact of ARACIS' external evaluation, the National Council for Higher Education Financing decided to increase the quota of quality indicators in the founding formula from 20% in 2006 to 30% in 2009, the remaining 70% depending on the number of equivalent students².

Each ARACIS external 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 (26-28 May 2010) of the University of Agronomic Science and Veterinary Medicine 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

² National report on Bologna reforms – 2009

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/links/Romania.htm>

The University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Bucharest - USAMV

Past developments

Founded in 1852 USAMV has evolved from an agricultural institute, undergoing evolutions of fields of specialization, status and names; it was joined with the school of veterinary medicine (established in 1855) to form the present institution which thus can draw on decades of traditions. Overtime, the university was generously endowed with land which served to establish the present campuses and didactic and experimental farms. Ownership of the land was cancelled during the communist period, then partially restored after the 1989 revolution but without the means of exploitation. Thus the 1990s represent a period of difficult adjustment to changes in society, limited employment opportunities for graduates, disappearing known structure of the economy, lack of means, no visibility toward the future. Through several initiatives, the leadership of the university embarked on a search for new solutions.

Expansion, consolidation, increasing financial autonomy marked the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The spectrum of taught specializations expanded and diversified. New courses were developed to meet the needs of a fast changing employment market. New forms of education delivery were implemented to reach a wider population: for example reduced frequency courses allowed those already employed to obtain a higher education or update it; distance education – this university was the first one to offer this form of education in Romania, the foreign expert was told – reached out to remote areas in the country. Between 2000 and 2008 students enrolment nearly tripled, from about 6000 to about 17000, an impressive growth rate, which required a matching increase of resources.

According to the *2000-2008 Report – Analysis of the evolution of financial resources, expenses, assets and performance indicators* during that period expenses increased 11 fold and income 12 fold. However, at the same time the state subsidies were multiplied by seven, thus did not keep up with the level of expenses which reflected the increase in student numbers; concurrently, income from the university's own resources (investments, leases, research grants, tuition fees, income from didactic farms) increased about 20 folds. Thus reliance on public funding has lessened from 65% to 38% and probably even less in the last two years, giving the university a wider margin of autonomy, not only for financial matters but consequently also for strategic and managerial decisions. Most note worthy in this evolution is the increasing portion of the budget devoted to research, from 2% in 2000 to nearly 34% in 2008. The rising impact at national and international levels, the increasing number of grants and citations reflect the high priority given to research.

USAMV Today

A number of characteristics stand out.

An extensive and certainly pleasant main campus located right in the city, Herastrau.

Although separate and less spacious the veterinary faculty Cotroceni campus is certainly quite adequate. About one third of the students enrolled live on campus, the university is fortunate to be able to meet the demand for accommodation almost completely. In addition many facilities for sport and social activities are available. However no adjustments of any kind are provided to accommodate persons with physical disabilities, measures that are now standard requirements in European public buildings even though they are not always implemented.

Adapting the current set up should be considered in the future. The various libraries – central and faculties - can boast quite a respectable stock of publications, both books and journals, and access to other bibliographic data via internet. Opening hours seem limited though, especially for an academic environment, a situation worsened by the fact that the library management software does not give the students access to reading material outside the library premises. It is imperative that a **new compatible software be installed, as is planned.** In a related issue, the students wish to have the **use of more study rooms, particularly in the dorms, from which they could also access the library.**

Student population

As already mentioned, students benefit from a pleasant campus, which offers many facilities besides accommodation, such as recreational and sport facilities, medical care, social services, central and faculties' libraries. If understood correctly, about one third of the students currently enrolled live on campus, another third or so are enrolled in distance education. By the nature of the institution and the fact that rural population makes up nearly 40% of Romanians, a high proportion (if not the major one) of students should come from that segment of the nation's population. By the university's own admission, this is not the case, in fact **students from rural areas are markedly under represented. In terms of recruitment of students major efforts should be expanded towards this segment of society in the future,** for enrolment in both distance and on site education.

Staffing issues

Compared to other institutions in Central and Eastern European countries, USAMV is fortunate that already 83% of its academic staff hold PhD degrees, and the others are working towards obtaining this qualification. The age structure is relatively favorable too, with 20% of the academic staff aged 35 or younger. How does this compare with the percentage of academic staff aged 50 or older (this expert did not see the latter percentage)? Already a number of retired professors³ continue to teach on a consultant status. It can be expected that a fair number of positions will need to be filled in the next few years. Besides, according to several persons interviewed, teaching is not a very attractive profession for youngsters, as it is not well remunerated, especially in comparison to what the private sector can offer. Then, if

³ 70 according to figure 1, page 21, in the self evaluation report

one studies the financial evolution between 2000 and 2008, while the overall budget grew nearly 12 times during the first decade of this century, staffing expenses grew only 8 times. A more refined analysis would be necessary to understand all the implications of this difference, but it seems probable that either salary increases or increase in staff numbers, or both, did not keep up with overall increase. **These tendencies could have negative impact on staff/student ratio and on quality. Fortunately, thanks to its financial autonomy and healthy financial situation, the university may be able offset negative impact.**

Education and research levels

All indications show that USAMV provides excellent education in Romania. In fact it attracts large numbers of applicants – in the average three for each opening - so that the university can select the best ones: according to figures for the 2009-2010 academic year the students enrolled in the state funded openings – by definition the applicants with the highest entry scores – all had very high secondary school grade averages. Currently a high percentage of the teaching staff hold PhDs. Most courses are developed and updated based on learning outcomes, and supported by adequate teaching and IT equipment. As mentioned above, the spectacular increase in research funding is producing results in the establishment of a doctoral school, well equipped laboratories, publications in international journals and number of citations. **By all accounts USAMV can well withstand the comparison with other European institutions in the same field.** Indeed, students expressed appreciation of the education they receive, alumni and employers all praised the level of qualification attained by the graduates. **The only weakness pointed out by all concerns practical training thought to be insufficient. This should be one of the areas of focus for future improvement.**

International and internal relations

A pro-rector oversees this domain, called “relations and image services”⁴. The same service covers student affairs, international relations - with European and bilateral mobility programs, dual programs, research partnership programs – relations with other partners at national level, visibility and image building, all successfully it seems. It is impressive that so much can be accomplished: a number (50 in 2009-2010 this expert was told) of students take part in the Erasmus program, although more could be involved; the number of bilateral agreements with universities abroad for exchange or research is growing; partnerships with Romanian public or private services or enterprises are developed; and the university identity is now translated and reinforced in a well researched insignia. Yet, while these activities can indeed be related, they address very different categories of stakeholders or partners. One wonders whether it might not be more efficient to **separate clearly the four types of activities** in different units, even if they still belong to the same pro-rectorate, **so that each unit could concentrate on its own activities which could then become even more productive.**

If the university is to attract more foreign students it will need gain a greater visibility outside Romania: **providing a website in English** – fortunately under construction right now – and **joining a generalist European association of higher education institutions** should help.

⁴ On the website: « Serviciul de Relații și Imagine »

Structure and management

As far as this expert could tell, the seven faculties, the distance education department, the didactic and experimental farms and the two campus extensions form a well integrated entity. Quality assurance and quality management became a priority during this first decade; and have been acknowledged with an ISO 9001 certification in 2007. Similarly, the quality of education provided by the faculty of veterinary medicine has been officially recognized by the European Association of Establishment for Veterinary Education – EAEVE (one of the first such institutions to be recognized); the faculty is now preparing for the second round of EAEVE evaluations. A rather complicated organizational chart reflects the diversity of the university's components; looking at this chart, it almost seems as though **administrative or management components** carry more weight than the **academic components** in the overall structure. It may be appropriate to **attempt to simplify the presentation of the former and to highlight the latter**.

Looking ahead

During the second decade of this century, Romania will become more fully integrated in the European Union, and USAMV in the European Higher Education Area where it can already withstand the comparison very well. The university has already implemented many of the Bologna action lines without much difficulty, and will continue to do so, **focusing on all aspects of quality⁵, in order to attain a level of quality culture that will pervade the entire institution**.

Imbalance in the university student population will have to be addressed, with **special measures towards those segments of society which are underrepresented**. Similarly, **career orientation towards “under chosen” specializations**, such as rural veterinary medicine, **should be encouraged**.

A few difficult years lay ahead: the education law has still not passed in Parliament; when it is enacted it will impact on staff status and working condition. While this evaluation visit was in process a drastic (25%!) reduction for all salaries in the country was announced. Since already academic salaries are low compared to other sectors of the economy, this austerity measure is likely to lead to the need to find other sources of income on the part of all the staff, with negative consequences on the quality of education. As a consequence of this measure and the unfavorable demographic trend nationwide **staffing issues could very well take priority in USAMV strategic development in the next few years**.

⁵ Incidentally: the self evaluation report provided is extremely well documented. The USAMV self evaluation team deserves compliments. However it is exclusively descriptive, the critical analytical dimension is missing. If a suggestion may be offered for future evaluations it is to include in the protocol evaluation recommendations a more critical and analytical approach.

Conclusion

The University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Bucharest is obviously a successful institution which can well withstand the comparison with its many partner institutions in Europe and the rest of the world.

Several suggestions are offered in the course of this brief report. They can be summarized as follows: the university should keep a focus on quality, on ever more complete integration in the European academic community, and most of all it should maintain its proactive stance especially in view of the difficult years to come.

On a personal note I would like to thank ARACIS for inviting me to take part in the evaluation of this prestigious institution. And I wish to express my profound gratitude to community of the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Bucharest, its Rector, President, Pro-Rectors, Professors, students and all the staff for their generous hospitality. I wish USAMV a very successful future.



Jacqueline Smith, 4 June 2010