



A R A C I S

Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

E x t e r n a l I n s t i t u t i o n a l E v a l u a t i o n

Universitatea din Pitești, Romania

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit for an institutional evaluation by ARACIS to the University of Pitești (UPIT) from May 9 to 11 of 2012. This was a follow-up ARACIS visit to UPIT after the institution had performed already an institutional evaluation in 2009.

Besides my experience as former rector and head of the senate at my home university I have participated in several ARACIS external evaluation procedures in Romania since 2009 and worked as expert for the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA) in many evaluations in 7 European countries as well as in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with the ARACIS-procedure in Romania but also my IEP-background and European perspectives. My point of view is on the institution as a whole and not so much on individual study programmes. The self-evaluation process, international perspectives as well as governance and quality assurance are important core elements of my considerations.

I am very grateful to the Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Doinița Ariton and the Team Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. dr. Dumitro Mățiș for conducting the evaluation process in a very efficient way and to all members of the ARACIS team for many constructive and fruitful discussions during the visit. My special thank goes to the Technical Secretary Mr. Mihai Marcu from ARACIS for his friendly way of holding contact with me, for preparing the visit in a perfect way and assisting me with translations during all plenary meetings. My thank also goes to Rector Prof.univ.dr. Didea Ionel from the UPIT for the great hospitality and to Prof. univ. dr. Viorel Nicolae from the Faculty of Mechanics and Technology for meeting me at the airport and organizing my transportation to and from the University. Last but not least I want to express my appreciation to the various representatives of UPIT, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their open discussions to a good view of the institution.

2. Organizational Details of the University of Pitești

The UPIT was founded as a state university in 1991. As an entity UPIT has evolved from the Higher Education Institute in Pitești which was established in 1974 by a merger of the Pedagogic Institute Pitești founded in 1962 and the Institute of Sub-Engineers Pitești founded in 1969. According to Law 88/1993 all faculties and specializations were accredited in 1995. Today the University is spread over five different cities (Pitești and Ștefănești, Ramnicu Vâlcea, Câmpulung, Alexandria, Slatina). It consists of 11 faculties (Sciences; Electronics, Communications and Computers; Physical Education and Sports; Economics; Mechanics and Technology; Letters; Social Sciences; Orthodox Theology; Mathematics and Computer Science; Education; Law and Administration) which offer 68

License (bachelor) study programmes, 63 Master programmes and 9 PhD programmes according to the Bologna structure. From the 68 License programmes 50 are accredited and 18 provisionally approved. The main teaching activities are enrolled in Pitești. Outside Pitești primarily teacher education is offered.

According to its genesis UPIT has a strong tradition in teacher education and its technical faculties. These are also the fields where UPIT contributes considerably to the local and regional needs of the Romanian society. The engineering disciplines are important partners for the local car industry.

The main financial resources of the University come from the government and from school fees. The total budget has been decreasing from 91,694,297 Lei in 2008 to 67,718,669 Lei in 2011.

In the academic year 2011/2012 out of 766 positions for teachers only 454 are occupied and 312 are vacant.

The University is led by the Rector together with four Vice-Rectors (teaching, student affairs and social issues, research, international relations and relations to the social-economic environment) and the Chancellor. The Senate according to the Law of National Education 2011 consists of 47 teachers and 16 students.

The University has land and buildings for teaching and learning, sports, student hostels and canteens with a total surface of 64,348 m² mainly in Pitești. A new building for economics and law will be opened soon.

UPIT has established in 1999 a Department for Quality in Education.

During the recent months the University did have to work on important tasks such as implementing the new Romanian Law of National Education 2011, working on the ARACIS recommendations from 2009 and preparing the ARACIS visit 2012. The new rector is on duty only since February 2012.

UPIT faces several difficult challenges:

- In Romania in general and also at UPIT there is a decreasing number of high school graduates.
- UPIT has a difficult geographical position close to the capital and other cities with well recognized universities.
- The total budget of the University is decreasing since four years.
- UPIT has a very complex structure with five locations and a big diversification with respect to established faculties and offered study programmes.
- There are many vacant positions for teaching staff.

3. Outline of the Visit

The 70 pages Institutional Evaluation Report (IER) plus 125 Annexes provided by UPIT give a description of the development of the institution since its foundation. Informative data on the institutional structure, number of students and teaching staff as well as the financial situation of the institution is provided. Special focus is taken on the area of teaching, listing educational spaces in detail and describing actions to assure the quality of teaching. The IER was helpful in preparing the visit and getting an initial good understanding of the teaching at UPIT, but was not satisfying with respect to the data concerning research and governance. The report was elaborated more or less by one single person, namely the former Vice-Rector for teaching, Prof.univ.dr. Ion Tabacu. There was no self evaluation process involving a bigger group or the whole institution. Hence the University missed the opportunity to use the evaluation as a starting point for an internal analysis of its problems and a general discussion of UPIT's future. The report does not contain important information on the governance of the institution (composition and size of Senate, number and duties of vice-rectors etc.), does not give any gender data (percentage of male and female staff and students) and does not refer to any of the challenges of the institution mentioned above. On the other hand the report is too long and redundant in several parts. Moreover, the English translation of the IER contains several irritating misprints and bad translations, what complicated the understanding of the institution.

The visit to UPIT started in the evening of May 8, 2012, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the local CARA hotel. During the evaluation visit I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

Wednesday, May 9, 2012

The evaluation procedure started at 9:00 a.m. by a meeting of one hour with the university leadership (Rector Prof. univ. dr. Ionel Didea, President of Senate Prof. univ. dr. Nicolae Brinzea and several Deans). The members of the ARACIS team and the representatives of UPIT were presented. Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Doinița Aritin and the Team Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. dr. Dumitru Mățiș explained the procedure for the actual evaluation exercise. Prof. univ. dr. Gabor Adrian, expert for Pastoral Orthodox Theology, mentioned that there were some problems with plagiarism found in student papers at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. Prof. univ. dr. Grosu Emilia Florina, expert for Physical Therapy and Special Motion, referred to problems because of the transfer of the study programme "Kinotherapy and Special Motion" from the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports to the Faculty of Sciences.

In the following internal ARACIS team meeting the Mission Director asked the team members on their opinions and observations so far.

From 10:30 to 12:00 a.m. the evaluation team was guided through the main campus. We passed the new building for law and economy and visited the University library, where

just an European day was organized. Afterwards laboratories for quality control in automobile production, for simulation of production processes and for material knowledge were visited. The inspected facilities were in good condition.

From 12:00 to 13:00 p.m. I checked documents in the teams' meeting room (identifying differences between the Romanian and English version the the IER).

For lunch the team was brought to the university restaurant located close to the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports. On this occasion we visited also the sports facilities, which were all very nice and of high standard.

From 14:30 to 17:00 p.m. I studied further documents provided by UPIT.

Between 17:10 and 18:30 p.m. the ARACIS team met with more than 70 students (more than half females). A translation of the discussion for deaf students was provided. Students were very lively and interested. The majority of students did choose UPIT for economic reasons. About 2/3 of the students work beside their studies. In some careers there is a lack of practical experience. E-learning methods are not common. Support for cultural activities should be improved. Results and consequences of the evaluation of courses are not known. Students need more information and support on mobility programmes and co-operations. Courses from abroad are sometimes not recognized by UPIT authorities. Local employers seem not to appreciate very much foreign experience of students. The standards in the student hostels are to improve (up to 6 persons in one room, missing cooking facilities etc.). The transfer of the study programme "Kinetotherapy and Special Motion" from Sports to Sciences was also mentioned.

From 18:30 to 20:00 p.m. the ARACIS team met with about 70 graduates. There were various statements that the education of the institution was good. On occasion of an EU-project graduates have been contacted in 2009 on their experiences. But there is no formalized organized feedback procedure from the alumni to the institution. Graduates also mentioned that in some careers there was not enough practical work (e.g. in law). Links with private companies should be strengthened. Activities for entrepreneurship should be enforced. There is no university wide alumni-club for graduates.

Thursday, May 10, 2012

From 9:00 to 15:00 a.m. I talked to other team members and met some representatives of UPIT. I checked various documents and investigated questions such as the management structure of the University, composition of old and new Senate, Ethic Commission, curricula in Mathematics and Informatics, student load in classes, introduction of ECTS, student questionnaires for the evaluation of courses, qualification of teaching staff, research activities, student welfare etc.

From 15:00 to 17:00 in the afternoon the ARACIS team met with 26 (7 females) employers/stakeholders. The participation of important personalities of the region in the discussion including the mayor of Pitești, representatives of the local government, a regional school inspector, a representative of the church and several representatives of the local industry as well as research departments was impressive. The public interest and

importance of the University for the region were clearly demonstrated. Especially the formation of engineers and the education of teachers were praised. UPIT is also of enormous economic importance for the region. People from computer industry wanted more practical education within the curricula. It was stated that students did not take seriously practical experience. Knowledge of foreign languages should be improved. From 17:00 to 20:30 p.m. I checked documents. Before leaving for dinner all team members gave a short report on their findings so far.

Friday, May 11, 2012

From 8:30 a.m. onwards team members finalized their documents and summarized their impressions.

From 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. I visited individually the Faculty of Mechanics and Technology and the Faculty of Electronics, Communications and Computers. There were not many students present and the visited lecture halls and teaching rooms did not have any multimedia equipment. Before leaving I came upon a lecture on "Environmental-friendly technologies, materials and socio-economic activities" at the Department of Environmental Engineering and Applied Engineering Sciences given within an Erasmus IP Project. This was a very interesting and high standard lecture given by a native speaker in English.

During the rest of the morning I collected additional information from the two student members within the team and a student representative of UPIT (discussion on student participation in decision making processes, student welfare).

From 12:30 to 13:30 p.m. the members of the ARACIS team including me reported to the university leadership on the preliminary results of the evaluation. Strengths and weaknesses were mentioned and some first recommendations given. The problems of plagiarism and the transfer of "Kinetotherapy and Special Motion" were discussed again. Rector Prof. univ. dr. Ionel Didea and President of Senate Prof. univ. dr. Nicolae Brinzea thanked the team for the open and fair discussions.

After lunch I left for the airport in Bucharest.

4. Governance and Institution

The University of Pitești goes actually through a difficult period of transition. The new university management according to the Law of National Education 2011 is on duty only for a view months. The new leadership is very engaged and highly committed to the institution. The Rector and the President of Senate are fully aware of the problems and challenges facing. With the transition to the new law a first step to make the Senate more capable of acting was realized by the reduction of the size from 85 members to 63 members. For an effective governing body the number of Senate members should be further reduced. On the other hand it is a Romanian speciality that there are no representatives of the university administration represented in the Senate.

The organizational structure of UPIT is complex. From the view of university manage-

ment the fragmentation into 11 faculties is not reasonable. A number of 4 to 5 faculties could be managed more effectively.

In the IER there is not much information available on decision structures inside the institution. But evidently there has not taken place so far any discussion on the future of UPIT considering the challenges mentioned before. As already stated the IER was produced by one single person. By my impression important opinion leaders as well as external stakeholders or students were not included into the elaboration. I consider the self-assessment process as the most important part of the evaluation procedure. The IER should be as much self-containing as possible. It should contain all relevant information on the institution. Compiling the IER only as a duty for an external evaluation means a waste of time and losing a big chance. I encourage institutions to be more self critical in the IER and to mention problems too. This could lead to a fruitful discussion on improvement and quality within the institution.

In the view of decreasing student numbers and a growing competition between the universities in the region UPIT has to say good bye to additive planning concepts and try to concentrate on its core tasks. Only the quality of the offered education can permanently attract students.

Internationalization of the institution is an area needing considerable improvement. Information and support to staff and students on grants, mobility programmes and co-operations have to be improved.

University income should be more diversified by enforcing projects and continuing education for institutions and people from the region.

The existence of a University Ethic Commission has to be commended. This commission should observe learning and research occurrences.

The University's aim for people with disabilities has to be commended. Handicapped students are well integrated.

Recommendations:

- UPIT should focus on a limited number of goals that can be realistically reached within the given constraints.
- Define performance indicators against all goals and objectives included in the strategic plan.
- React to the challenges of a modern university management and simplify your organisational structure (size of Senate, number of Faculties, decision and reporting procedures etc.).
- Prioritise the renovation/construction of lecture rooms and laboratory equipment and provide facilities for multi-media teaching.
- Improve the quality of student hostels. The number of students per room should be reduced to 2 to 3 students. It is absolutely desirable to install common coffee corners and small kitchens in the student dormitories.

- The activities of the Department for International Relations have to be improved and expanded.
- In order to discuss and solve also sensitive tasks concerning students and staff I strongly recommend to install an inter-university Ethic Commission with half members coming from UPIT and the other half from other universities. Maybe external stakeholders should be included too.
- The financial resources of UPIT should be more diversified. Try to open other sources by projects and agreements with outside partners and life long learning activities.
- As regional university UPIT should formalize its excellent relations with the local city council and the regional government and try to sign contracts of co-operation.
- Strengthen relations and information flow with graduates and employers. These groups have mentioned their high appreciation for the institution. The University should make more use of this advantage.
- Strengthen the corporate identity of UPIT by providing a common e-mail address for staff, students and alumni.
- Increase the cultural role and influence of UPIT in the region by supporting and extending student and staff cultural activities.

5. Teaching and Learning

All study programmes of UPIT have changed to the three cycle Bologna system. The quality of the formation is generally recognized by employers and graduates. The University has reacted on the ARACIS visit three years ago and closed study offers with limited or no accreditation. The fragmentation especially of the License study programmes together with many vacant positions for teachers results in very high teaching loads and a lack of time for research. In order to respond to the strong competition for students the most important action is strengthening the quality of education.

Recommendations:

- Decrease the number of offered study programmes to a reasonable number of different formations.
- Staff vacant teaching positions and do not give teaching hours of vacant positions to employed staff for extra remuneration.
- Extend staff development activities.
- Take appropriate measures against plagiarism in student papers.
- Ensure that the results of the evaluation of courses are known and serve for further improvement of teaching.

- Increase autonomous student work and self learning parts. Strengthen practical parts of undergraduate education. Enforce contacts between the University and enterprises in order to integrate students into project work.
- Increase assistance for mobility programmes and extend foreign language practice.
- Improve the availability of English text books and study materials in the University library.
- Review curricula with respect to international standards and increase the number of double degree programmes.
- Include stakeholders and employers into the discussion on curricula.
- Improve student welfare, especially the quality of student hostels.

6. Research and Service to Society

The description of the research activities in the IER is very general. There is no description of a visible clear research policy of UPIT. The IER does not mention any concrete projects nor institutional research tasks. Evidently there are big differences between the Faculties with respect to research production and number of projects. Evidently engineering disciplines have very good relations with the local car industry and integrate students into their research projects.

Recommendations:

- Proceed moving from a teaching university to a teaching university with research.
- Focus research where possible in order to make research more visible. Enforce interdisciplinary research. Create critical masses by enforcing co-operations with other institutions. Support publications in English language.
- Support young research staff by reduction of their teaching load and give financial support for teaching staff to participate in national and international conferences, in research collaborations and advanced training courses.
- Strengthen and make more visible services to society and consider the creation of a science and research park linked to the University and the provision of support for entrepreneurship.
- Quality and plagiarism in research should be made subjects of discussion and observation within UPIT.

7. Quality Culture

The University has started with quality assurance procedures with respect to teaching. But there is still no functioning quality assurance system for the whole institution. Quality

assurance should cover all aspects of the institution, namely teaching, research as well as governance and administration. Quality assessment must be seen as an instrument for improvement and not as burden. In view of the incidences with plagiarism UPIT should take special care of this problem and inform students and staff on scientific rules and honesty.

Recommendations:

- Define clear procedures how to improve teaching, research, governance and administration by the extensively collected information and the results of different evaluations.
- Use the collected data for strategic planning and in order to provide advice. Develop mechanisms to support academic staff in their teaching and research missions.
- Make results and consequences of student evaluations transparent so that students and staff are informed.
- Take special care regarding the quality of student papers and research results in order to avoid cases of plagiarism.

8. Final Remarks

The ARACIS external institutional evaluation is an important step for quality assurance in higher education in Romania. The procedure is well designed and works with excellent peers. Nevertheless, institutions should be aware that the process is not only focused on the accreditation of study programmes. The institution as a whole is another important part of the review. Hence institutions should be encouraged to cover governance and management facts as well in their evaluation report. In order to make better use of the evaluation process institutions should be more self-critical by not looking only into the past and continuing traditional additive planning. The view should be more directed into the future trying to find solutions for the existing constraints and problems. This report should motivate UPIT to go into this direction and enforce its process of internal discussion leading to further improvement and reflection about priorities.

UPIT plays an important educational and socio-economical role for the region. The institution is highly appreciated by employers, stakeholders, graduates and students. With its motivated and very professional leadership UPIT has the capacity to react adequately to the current challenges of higher education in Romania and Europe. Hence UPIT should be optimistic about its future.



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