



ARACIS

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

External Institutional Evaluation

Universitatea "Ovidius" din Constanța, România

Foreign Expert Report

20th January 2016

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the “Ovidius” University (OUC) in Constanța for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from January 13 to 15, 2016. Beside the institutional evaluation, 21 study programmes of OUC were selected for assessment too. This was the second evaluation of OUC after the ARACIS-visit in 2009, where the institution received the “High Degree of Confidence” rating.

During the last 16 years I have participated already in more than 40 evaluations of Higher Education Institutions in 9 European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with OUC but also give international perspectives. My focus 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.ing. Dorian Cojocaru and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr.ing. Marius Bulgaru for conducting this evaluation process in a very efficient way and to all members of the ARACIS team for their constructive and fruitful discussions during the visit. My special thanks go to the Technical Secretary Mr. Mihai Marcu from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation and for his friendly way of holding contact with me, providing all necessary information and support for the visit.

I also give my cordial thanks to the Rector Prof.univ.dr. Sorin Rugină from the “Ovidius” University in Constanța for the friendly welcome and perfect organisation of my visit and to Vice-rector Prof.univ.dr. Mihai A. Gîrțu, who welcomed me at Bucharest airport, assisted me with translations and organisational tasks during the whole visit and contributed considerably to a good understanding of OUC by answering numerous questions.

I also want to express my appreciation to the various representatives of OUC including students, who have actively participated in the meetings.

2. Organisational Details of the “Ovidius” University

The “Ovidius” University (OUC) in Constanța is a public institution of higher education founded as a Pedagogical Institute in 1961. In 1990 the Institute was transformed into a multidisciplinary university and named after the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso. The three-cycle Bologna system with Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes was implemented 2005-2006. Today OUC is the most important Romanian university in Constanța and the region Dobruja. Constanța is a centre of cultural, historic and commercial importance. It is the largest port of the European Union in the Black Sea.

According to the Internal Institutional Evaluation Report (IIER) the University is organised at present in 16 Faculties and an Institute of Doctoral Schools. OUC offers 86 Bachelor programmes (11624 students), 76 Master programmes (2143 students) and 8 domains with PhD studies (315 students). A special feature of OUC is that it has with 1223 foreign students a higher percentage of students from abroad than other Romanian universities.

Similar to other Romanian universities the provided information on staff numbers of OUC is somehow untransparent und not consistent. Annex 14 of the IIER states 649 didactic positions occupied, 762 positions vacant as well as 213 auxiliary teaching staff and 91 administrative staff. The IIER itself gives lightly different numbers. It is not clear at all how the teaching of

the vacant teaching positions is covered. In addition, several academic teachers hold also administrative positions.

OUC owns or has rented buildings in 11 different locations in Constanța. According to the provided information and observations during the visit, all classrooms are equipped according to the state of the art. Nevertheless, in compliance with European standards OUC has some deficiencies providing access for handicapped people to its installations.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the government, from tuition-fees of students as well as from research and consulting. According to the IIER the revenue in 2015 was 120.061.789 Lei compared with 122.117.985 Lei expenditure. The revenue from basic funding by the Government went down from 55% of the total revenue in 2009 to approximately 43% in 2014. About 63% of the expenditure are spent for staff.

The University is governed by the Senate and the Administrative Council. The Senate consist of 72 members and - according to the Law of National Education 2011 - has the task to monitor and control the activity of the executive management. The Administrative Council is formed by the Rector, the 5 Vice-Rectors, the Deans, one student and some other leading managers.

3. Outline of the Visit

During the last 5 years, OUC has passed several evaluations. In addition, in 2013, the acting rector of OUC had to resign because of irregularities and corruption concerning the admission of students. Consequently, the financial and admission procedures of OUC were extensively examined by a government delegation. Hence, it is no wonder that many members of OUC are somehow tired preparing reports and being investigated. This situation makes it difficult for the present university management to implement necessary structural changes and to respond to new challenges. Hence, during the last years only small steps of improvement have been taken and many of the recommendations of the External Expert of the 2009 ARACIS visit and the 2013 institutional evaluation of the European University Association are still valid.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Process

As already mentioned, OUC has prepared an Internal Institutional Evaluation Report (IIER) for this ARACIS evaluation. The Report concentrates on the changes since the visit in 2009 and provides the most important facts on OUC in a compact form of 34 pages. Informative data on the institution, the management as well as teaching and research is provided. As usual in Romania, the IIER is not very self-critical. Neither the admission problems in 2013 nor the consequences taken in order to avoid similar incidents in the future are mentioned. The IIER does also not discuss any perspectives of OUC for the future.

By my view, OUC could have made a better use of this evaluation by revealing problems and discussing them with experienced external experts. I also believe that on occasion of an evaluation visit the institution should discuss possibilities and plans for the future too.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the "Ovidius" University in Constanța began in the evening of January 12, 2016, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Hotel Megalos in Constanța. This hotel is situated in Bd. Mamaia directly in front of the rectorate of OUC.

During the evaluation visit, I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on January 13 at 9:00 in the Senate Meeting Room of OUC in the Aleea Universității campus. Rector Prof.univ.dr. Sorin Rugină welcomed the ARACIS delegation. The ARACIS team and the university representatives (President of Senate, Vice-Rectors, Deans, etc.) were presented. Afterwards the Rector gave a short presentation of the City of Constanța, the Province of Dobruja and the University. The Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr.ing. Marius Bulgaru explained the evaluation procedure.

In the course of the first day, the ARACIS team performed the usual activities. After a short internal ARACIS meeting in order to discuss the organisational details of the evaluation we visited for about 90 minutes the installations of the European research project "Sustainable Raw Materials" and the recently opened CEDMOG Centre, a European funded bio research lab. CEDMOG strongly impresses by a very modern infrastructure and expensive electronic equipment. We also met staff and students working in the labs.

At the end of the tour, we moved to the Rectorate in the Bd. Mamaia campus and attended a performance of art students in the Aula Magna.

Just before lunch, I separated from the Team and visited the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics. The Dean and staff members explained and showed some results of the on-going research focus on visualization, computer simulation and picture processing.

In the afternoon, I had an informative and fruitful private meeting with the Rector Prof.univ.dr. Sorin Rugină, with the President of the Senate Prof.univ.dr. Ion Botescu and with the Vice-Rector for Internationalisation Prof.univ.dr. Mihai A. Gîrțu. The fact that the Rector and the President of the Senate were sharing the meeting with me was a signal that the governing bodies at OUC had found a successful way of cooperation despite of the different interpretations of the duties and rights of the Rector and the Senate in the Law 2011.

In the late afternoon, I attended the meetings of the ARACIS team with about 100 students, with about 35 graduates and finally a meeting with more than 35 employers. As usual, these meetings with the huge groups of students, graduates and employers did not really disclose any severe problems. Students and graduates were commonly positive. Some students wanted more information on the use of the collected fees by the institution. After the financial irregularities two years ago, the institution should be careful to explain to students what happens with the collected money for materials in labs, etc. Another task was the wish for more practical work in several disciplines. The evaluation of teachers by students was considered as positive.

Thursday, January 14, I used to interchange opinion with several other Team members in order to obtain some information on the assessment of study programmes and to complete my view on the institution.

In the morning of Friday, January 15, I made a short visit to the ERASMUS office of OUC and informed on the on-going activities. A meeting before lunch, where the Team presented the impressions and results of the visit to the leaders of OUC concluded the evaluation visit.

4. Governance and Institution

The leadership of the University shows very high identification with the institution and is highly committed. Despite of the Law 2011, which allows different interpretation of the duties and rights of the Rector and the Senate, the governing bodies at OUC have developed a culture of consensus and co-operation, which makes it possible to govern the institution in an appropriate way. However, the separation of tasks of the legislative bodies from the tasks of the executive organs is not well defined and there are several overlaps. Like many other Romanian universities also OUC has a favor for collective decisions. The size of the Senate with 72 members is quite big for a modern university governing body - Vienna University with 93000 students has a Senate of 18 members. The organizational structure of OUC is very complex. The number of 16 faculties compared with other European universities is big – Vienna University has 15 faculties and four special centres. The study programmes of OUC are highly fragmented and the number of about 170 programmes is very big with respect to the student number – Vienna University offers about 180 programmes. The existence of a Strategic Plan 2012-2016 and an Operational Plan 2015 has to be commended. But long-term strategy at Romanian universities is limited by a lack of autonomy and legislative and financial uncertainties and constraints.

Recommendations:

- Simplify the organisational structure and review the size of decision-making bodies.
- Clarify the role of the Senate and the Administrative Board.
Limit the function of the Senate to core academic issues of integrity and standards, the definition of the general framework for the Administrative Board and the monitoring of the institution. (E.g., the Senate should decide the rules for staff promotion but not discuss and decide individual promotions. Individual promotions according to the rules given by the Senate should be a task of the Rector and the Deans.)
Give the Rector and the Deans full responsibility for the operational management of the institution to ensure that they are able to respond to changing contexts and implement innovations.
- Try to motivate students to take more responsibility and ownership for the development of the University.
- Introduce benchmarks and performance indicators drawn from comparable institutions into the Strategic Plan. Define responsibilities, calculate costs, create monitoring instruments, etc., for the different tasks of the Operational Plan.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as the occurrences at OUC prove, an ethic commission composed only by members from the institution will not be able to handle sensitive cases like corruption and academic misconduct. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally - an inter-university commission with half members coming from OUC and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Culture

OUC has set up important activities and procedures for quality assurance. At central level there are a vice-rector responsible for quality assurance and the “Assessment and Quality Assurance Commission” as well as several commissions of the Senate involved in quality

aspects. At faculty and department level subcommittees for quality assessment and management are set up. However, the organisation and procedures for quality assurance seem to be too complex and fragmented in order to create a quality culture at OUC. Many university members still consider quality assurance as an obligation and have little understanding of its purpose and benefits. Hence in order to establish a real quality culture at OUC the quality assurance actions should reduce bureaucratic efforts, avoid redundancies and shift from inspection and control to an improve-oriented approach providing support to staff and students.

Recommendations:

- Reduce burden of quality assurance procedures.
- Promote more clearly to staff and students the benefits and improvements deriving from quality assurance procedures in order to increase motivation of staff and students for taking ownership of quality assurance.
- Formalise the involvement of stakeholders and employers in order to monitor and improve the quality of education.

6. Teaching and Learning

Some of the study programs of OUC are highly appreciated and enjoy a high reputation also abroad. The quality of the education at OUC was recognized in the meetings with employers, graduates and students. Neither the meeting with about 100 students nor the meeting with about 35 graduates disclosed any severe problems. Both groups were not very critical with respect to possible weaknesses. I think that the visited universities and ARACIS should reconsider bounds for the size of the meetings with students, graduates and employers. Discussions within huge groups do not really contribute to a good understanding of the institution or bring to light weaknesses. It is also somehow embarrassing when there attend about 35 employers and there is only time for about 10 of them to give a statement. The scheduled hour for the meeting with the employers was far too short, even more, as some of the employers misused the meeting to present their own personality and career instead of explaining their relations with OUC and experience with graduates.

The high fragmentation and specialisation of the study programmes at OUC contradicts the demand of a regional university like OUC to provide graduates who are not too specialized. The big number of similar programmes makes the selection of the appropriate programme also difficult for new students.

There are evidently deficiencies with respect to the Bologna ideas (shift to a student centred education, more selective subjects, focus on employability, etc.). The involvement of stakeholders into curricula discussions seems to be very informal and based on personal relations. Support services for students preparing them for the job market (career centre) or establishing their own business (incubator, entrepreneurship, spin-offs, etc.) are not very active or do not exist.

Special acknowledgement deserves the Confucius Class for Chinese language and culture inaugurated in 2011.

Recommendations:

- Merge similar study programmes, increase the number of optional courses in programmes and make better use of synergies.
- Increase autonomous student work and self-learning parts.

- Involve stakeholders systematically into curricula discussions.
- Increase assistance for students looking for an internship and strengthen the activities in order to facilitate the start of graduates into the working world.

7. Research and Service to Society

OUC has a strong research orientation and performs excellent research in several areas. This is expressed by the leadership of OUC and is proved by research funds coming from national and international projects and by publications in international recognised journals. The recently opened CEDMOG research centre will be attractive not only for OUC staff but also for researchers from other research institutions.

However, research at OUC is highly fragmented and of a large proportion grown on individual initiatives. Co-operations with neighbouring universities and with regional and private actors in research and consulting activities are mainly based on personal contacts and not on institutional relationships.

Recommendations:

- Develop a research strategy based on clear priorities and already existing fields of excellence.
- Support co-operations with other research institutions making use of the existing excellent research facilities at OUC.
- Further increase visibility of research by intensifying international activities (e.g. participation in international research groups, publication in international recognised journals)
- Strengthen and extend relations with the region. Present examples of good research and consultancies to potential partners. Try to sign mutual contracts of co-operation in order to make income from collaborations sustainable.
- Support entrepreneurial activities of staff, graduates and students.

8. Internationalisation

Internationalisation is one of the strong points at OUC. The “Internationalization Strategy 2015-2019”, approved 2015, forms an excellent base for the further strengthening of the international position of the University. Making use of its history and privileged geographical position, OUC is very active with respect to some international tasks, such as students from abroad and mobility. But internationalisation is a multi-dimensional task taking into account mobility programmes, language policy, curricula, joint study and double degree programmes, collaborative research, conference attendance, etc. Some of these aspects could still be further improved.

Recommendations:

- Realize and monitor the implementation of the “Internationalization Strategy 2015-2019”.
- Continue intentions to be internationally more visible and better known.
- Further strengthen the foreign language policy inside the institution.
- Orientate the curricula according to international standards.

9. Final Remarks

The Ovidius University in Constanța plays a very important role in education and research, especially for the South-East of Romania. It is the largest university at the Black Sea in the European Union and an Eastern gateway to Europe. Benefitting from the historical impact and the privileged geographical position of Constanța and the committed leadership and staff of OUC, the institution has an excellent base to handle its present and future challenges. OUC has the potential to become an internationally respected and recognised university. However, in order to cope with the threats it may face in the future, OUC should set up a modern university management, reducing bureaucracy, streamlining decision procedures and simplifying the organisational structure. My remarks and recommendations should assist OUC to pursue a successful way into the future.

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