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ARACIS

Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

External Institutional Evaluation

Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti

Romania

Foreign Expert Report

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of Denmark.

1. Introduction and conclusion.

In the autumn this year (2013) I was invited to participate in the External Institutional Evaluation of the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, Romania, and I accepted the invitation with pleasure. I have been involved in other evaluations in Romania for the National University Research Council and have furthermore performed a series of different university evaluations in Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic, Cyprus and Turkey.

I have earlier from ARACIS received a guide on "External Evaluation of Academic Quality in Accredited Higher Education Institutions (External Institutional Evaluation)". This guide follows the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, and I find the procedure well defined and it shows that a competent agency is running this type of evaluations. This is indeed also the impression I have got from former ARACIS evaluations I have participated in at Dimitri Cantemir University, University Carol Davila, Tibiscus University and the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca.

In the beginning of November I received the Internal Evaluation Report (In View of External Evaluation of Academic Quality Standards) from the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, 29 pages with indication of a number of appendices in the form of links to documents. Unfortunately for this external expert the appendices were not available in English, and thus my judgements in this document is only based on the English version of the Internal Evaluation Report and the conversations I have been involved in during the site visit at the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti (PGU).

The site visit to the university was well organised and we were well taken care of all the way from transportation internationally as well as nationally and between meetings, to accommodation in a local and very comfortable hotel. The meetings at the university went on in a very pleasant atmosphere and everything being asked for in the form of documents and meetings was delivered promptly and correct.

The meetings in and with the ARACIS team of evaluation were generally performed in the Romanian language, and for this matter I was during the site visit attended by very competent interpreters who gave me a first hand feeling for the presentations and discussions going on around the table and in at the various meetings with the management, alumni, students, teachers and employers of the university graduates.

PGU is a public medium sized higher education institution. It strives to offer research based education at all three levels – bachelor, master and PhD - and to develop and maintain an internationally oriented atmosphere in its teaching and research activities. My judgement in this relation is that there are still challenges to overcome. However, there exist international relations, international cooperation and Erasmus activities to build on.

As far as the commandment of the English language is concerned there is still something which needs to be done both at the management level and in relation to especially the senior teaching and research staff. However, then students and the younger part of the academic staff is generally rather proficient in English. The reason for the mentioned difference in knowledge of the English language is obvious, but I do not think that the university has time to wait for the next generation to take over. The language problem has to be tackled now if PGU wants to advance further in the international competition among universities for position and resources.

Right now no courses is offered in English and foreign students coming to PGU are asked to take a course in the Romanian language during the first year at the university. There is as far as I understand it no courses given in English at PGU right now, but there is a plan as from next year to offer a master specialisation in a two years English spoken version. The university also has focus on the internationalisation process through the appointment of a Vice-Rector for International Relations.

I find the working conditions for the academic staff in relation to their research work reasonable in relation to office space, experimental facilities, means of communication and access to relevant and recent literature also in electronic form. However, the amount of time allocated for research for the individual teacher is somewhat below the standards at universities in e.g. many universities in Western Europe.

It is also obvious that there exists a close working relationship with many oil and gas related companies in Romania and in the world outside Romania. Many of these companies have been willing to make donations in order to help the university in installing modern facilities for research and education. These cooperation partners are furthermore involved in mutual research projects and in offering students from PGU internships during their studies.

4.

I feel that I during the 2½ days of visiting the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, through my preparations done in the available, but few documents in English and especially in the conversations with members of the management team and a number of staff members and students have got a fair notion of the standards and performances of the management, the academic staff, the students at the university and the organisation as a whole.

On basis of the below described experiences I find this university as being of

High Degree of Trust

in its striving for given the students of the university a qualifying education and to develop the university in cooperation with industry towards goals being of international standards.

Signed: Hans Peter Jensen

Professor, former Rector at The Technical University of Denmark

2. Strategic Planning

There exists a Strategic Plan of the University for the 2012 - 2016 period, which has been a platform for drawing up the Operational Plan of the PGU for 2013. These two documents were not available in English.

However, a mission statement and various objectives are presented in the English version of the Self Evaluation Report.

This statement is threefold: The didactic mission, the scientific research mission and the civic and cultural mission.

I think the three mission statements are very broad, vague and unspecific.

These statements summarise as follows:

“PGU considers its main mission to be represented by the consolidation of the status it has acquired in a period over 50 years of existence as an internationally acknowledged centre of excellence in training and research in the domain of oil and gas industry”.

Nobody can disagree with the above text. However, it is too much based on the past and not in line with the ambitions for the future. A strategy should look forward and identify goals - very ambitious goals - towards which the university will strive in order to become attractive to students and cooperation partners at home and especially abroad.

I also have some remarks in relation to the objective of establishing a participatory democracy at PGU. This is going to allow the pluralism of opinions, initiatives and communication of the University community. This is fine. What is not so fine is the ambition of including teachers, researchers, students, trade unions and professional organisations in RUNNING the University. If the last ambition is going to be followed according to the wording, it is to my experience going to be difficult to define and sharpen the goal and procedures of PGU, and thus a strategic plan might easily become too diffuse.

In relation to development of a strong and modern university it is according to my opinion essential that the university ensure quality in all aspects related to university activities and procedures.

I have noticed in the university organisational diagram that the Secretariat for Managerial Quality is placed under the Pro-Rector for Studies. I do not think this is the right place for such services. In my opinion it ought to refer directly to the Rector, since quality in all university businesses is an essential and delicate issue and thus has to be determined under direct reference to the top manager: The Rector.

3. SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis is often a valuable background for strategic planning and subsequently the preparation of a operational plan.

I have not in the material presented to me nor in the annexes (in Romania) found any traces of such an analysis.

For future strategic planning processes I will recommend that PGU uses the SWOT analysis instrument from top to bottom in the institution.

4. Bologna Process

In the Evaluation Report of PGU the following is stated:

“The main objectives in the field of teaching activities is:

The continuous improvement of the management system and executive structures of the University, at all levels, of fields of study, the curriculum, the syllabuses, the didactic methods and technologies with a view to aligning them with the European standards (as they are stated in the Bologna Declaration, subsequently modifies and supplemented) and the worldwide standards as well”.

I read and hear this as if PGU plans and executes the studies in the university according to the Bologna Process.

The Bologna system has the following six specific conditions for studies at higher education institutions:

1. Easy readable and understandable grading systems and diploma supplements.
2. A two cycle study structure consisting of a Bachelor's and a Master's level in a 3 + 2 model leading to a total of 5 years of studies to obtain the Master's level.
3. Common point systems (ECTS) and grading scale.
4. Possibilities for mobility
5. European cooperation in quality development.
6. Promoting an European dimension in higher education across Europe.

In relation to the Bologna criteria I find at PGU two major discrepancies.

First and foremost this university awards as do other technical universities in Romania a Bachelor's degree only after four year of studies, and the argument presented is that this is the amount of years it takes to give students the necessary qualification for this educational level in engineering.

Also the faculty members, with whom I have discussed this subject, generally found that four years as basis for a bachelor's degree in engineering is a necessity.

I do not agree and I suggest that the university should take the following initiatives:

1. To go through in a systematic way all courses according to the Bologna criteria and take advantage of new pedagogic method and procedures in order to improve the learning process (e.g. through PBS = Problem Based learning). To take away subject overlaps and focus on engaging the students actively in the learning process not only through homework but through active participation in the classroom and the lecture hall.
2. I think that the university should take up a discussion with the relevant authorities in order to normalise the situation in relationship to the majority of the technical universities in Europe which give a bachelor's degree in engineering after three years of successful studies.
3. Cutting down a bachelor's degree to three years and effectively aligning the study program with the Bologna criteria would also make international exchanges and transfer of merits from one university to another much easier than is obviously the case PGU today. I was in this relation informed about some difficulties in the credit transfer process for exchange students which might tempt some students to refrain from using the Erasmus Program.

In conversations with students I got the impression that the curricula in PGU has a tendency to be overloaded. In this relation I think that the university ought to go through the entire curriculum and check if the ECTS system works in the proper way at the institution.

60 ECTS points compare to a full year's study of courses where 1 ECTS point corresponds to 28 working hours. This means that the curriculum should be build up in such a way that an average student should be able to pass through the relevant tests of the year with an engagement corresponding to approximately 1700 hours.

Again I emphasize that the university ought to check consistently whether the expected Bologna standards really is the background for the present course packages at PGU?

5. Internationalisation

A university of today in what we call the global village needs to have an internationalisation policy and an ambition to pursue it.

Internationalization is considered important for PGU and the university has appointed a Vice-Rector in charge of International relations. The International Relations Department supports the permanent interest of PGU to develop the collaboration (in the field of scientific research and educational process) with foreign universities and to increase its international visibility by means of Cooperation agreements.

It was also pointed out to me that PGU is a member of the prestigious Society of Petroleum Engineers, SPE.

There is registered 18 bilateral Erasmus agreements with universities from eight different countries and 22 cooperation agreements with universities from fourteen different countries. However, the numbers of exchanges of both staff and students are not impressive the size of PGU taken into consideration.

I take note of the fact that the university has a Vice-Rector for International Relations and that there exists several international agreements on exchange and cooperation which a good platform for the extension of internal cooperation on all levels and aspects..

What I have not found is a specific and visible document which is setting the standards and ambitions of the internationalization process of PGU.

I was, however, assured in my dialogue with the University Presidency that internationalisation will progress in this university. One of the conditions for this is that the English language acquire a more widespread and profound base at PGU that it is the case today. (*cf. below on item 6*).

6. Language

In smaller countries with a specific language of its own like *e.g.* Denmark and Romania it is of utmost importance that knowledge of and competences in foreign languages is a wide spread phenomenon. In the case of universities proficiency in the English language is very important as this language today is the *lingua franca* of science in general. If one cannot communicate, write, speak and publish in English one has a major problem in advancing in one's subject and to be competitive on the international scene.

I do not know specifically which policy the Romanian government and parliament has on foreign languages and intercultural competences for the Romanian population – and especially for children and youth under education. I was however informed that it was mandatory for foreign students in Romanian universities to take a course in the Romanian language for two semesters. This latter obligation is seen from my point of view not beneficial for exchange of students internationally, whereas I of course take note of the political reasons for such a rule. I noticed that in generally the younger generation at PGU has good command of the English language whereas a number of the senior staff members has difficulties in expressing themselves in English, and this is a challenge which PGU will have to tackle as soon and as effectively as possible, if the ambition is to become more international competitive and recognized than it is the case now.

7. Premises and facilities

PGU is a medium sized institution with a concentrated campus in Ploiesti. Close to the campus one finds the student hostel which are relatively modern and of such capacity, that those students who require accommodation can find a place here at a reasonable price.

I had during my stay at PGU the chance of visiting some of the premises incl. teaching and research facilities.

I found the laboratories and teaching facilities as being of good quality and well equipped with instruments of contemporary appearance originating for some parts in cooperation projects with international companies in the oil sector.

Much cutting edge research of today develops through cooperation between traditional areas of well defined subjects *e.g.* between engineering, humanities, design and art. The platform for interdisciplinary cooperation (co-operation and competition) has to be nursed and people brought together. I therefore find it of outmost importance that PGU has set up a Faculty of Economic Sciences and a Faculty of Letters and Sciences. This give an opportunity to add new thoughts, dimensions and approaches to the work in petroleum, gas, mechanical and electrical engineering and vice versa if the various departments are willing to work together and cross fertilize their respective working areas.

A final remark under this heading is directed towards the library facilities. These look fine and spacious, but has a somewhat old-fashioned appearance in the way that it offers very few work-stations with access to the world wide web (www). A modern competitive university would according to my mind work seriously and focused in changing a traditional library into a knowledge center which is abound in electronic working facilities.

8. Benchmarking.

In the Evaluation Report, which we received as preparation for our site visit and evaluation of PGU a number of tables are illustrating the development of the university since 2008.

It is certainly necessary in order to evaluate the functions and quality of a university to compile a number of key parameter. These might be: Student intake, number of graduates at all academic levels, drop-out rates, employability of graduates, number of teaching staff, number of academic staff doing research, number of administrative and technical staff etc. Further one needs numbers of publications and type of publications, books, patents, national and international contracts, number of international exchanges for both students and staff, invitations to lecturing at national and international conferences, number of visiting scholars etc.

Other parameters may also be valid. However, my point is that any institution should build up a consequent documentation system. Such a system is valuable in the management of the individual university, however, also important in accounting to agencies and ministries. Finally and most importantly key parameters may be used in benchmarking with other higher education institutions in Romania and more importantly abroad to document a certain ranking and to learn about both strong and weak sides of the individual institutions.

I noticed in the evaluation material, which we have received in connection with this site visit, that PGU has international cooperation with universities in France, Spain, Turkey, Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, Poland, Portugal, Malaysia, Mexico, Turkmenistan, Taiwan, Greece and Kazakhstan.

I suggest that PGU chooses 2 –4 partner institutions from the above mentioned countries with whom benchmarking is performed as an exercise.

9. Course Evaluations.

During our visit at PGU we had the opportunity to talk with a number of students. It was a pleasure to listen to their reports from classes and to feel their enthusiasm for the institution.

With respect to course evaluations the students knew about the existence of these and the connected process. However, the indication was from both students and teachers that participation in the course evaluations was relatively low, and there was also some dissatisfaction over the fact that the students seldom got to know about the results and the consequences of the course evaluations. This is a shame as course evaluations are a useful instrument in the relation to create better learning outcomes and for teachers to improve their performance.

I understood that the course evaluations were performed at the end of a semester where possibly only a fraction of the students were present in the classes, and thus the score in relation to number of potential participants could be relatively low.

With respect to course evaluations these can be done in many ways and with many purposes and the literature about this subject is quite extended. My personal opinion about course evaluations and whether students think they are worth the effort or not is related to whether the students experience an effect of the performed evaluation. Consequently my personal priority for course evaluations is to execute them at midterm. In that way the students may actually be able to discuss the results with their teacher in the class and see the potential changes in the course content and delivery while they themselves are still attending the course.

In relation to students we learned that there were several active student committees and student unions. This is according to my opinion a very good sign for the university, since the users of the institution in this way may have a saying about university life in general and involvement in the decision making at the management level of the university e.g. through their memberships in the Senate..

10. Final Remarks.

It was interesting to participate in the External Institutional Evaluation of the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti and I learned through this engagement more than I knew before coming to Ploiesti about the situation for universities in Romania, which for the time being is not so easy since teaching occupies a relation big portion of the working time for the academic staff.

12.

As a matter of fact I heard sometimes during my visit at PGU that the available time for research for the academic staff was lying around 1/5 of the total working hours which is low compared to a number of other universities in EU where the allocated time for research may be as high as up to 1/2 of total working hours.

In this light I will allow myself to be impressed with some of the research activities and results with which I was presented with during my site visit in PGU.

I will also at this point mention on of the meetings which the evaluation team had during the site visit at PGU. This meeting was arranged for employers of graduates from PGU and they all unanimously reported a great satisfaction with their employees origination from PGU. The graduates were well prepared, knowledgeable, well organised etc. It was of course a good experience to listen to these testimonial (more than 15) being so impressed by the capabilities of the graduates from PGU. I am on the other hand sure that some of the employers might have some suggestions for improvements and alterations at PGU. For this purpose the university might want to create a forum where the university management meet on a regular basis with representative from industry and other employers of graduates from PGU. I am sure, that such a forum might create a valuable platform for future development and improvements at the university.

For further evaluations along the lines defined by ARACIS I will suggest as before to focus on a procedure of performing a major part of the reporting and discussions in English if foreign experts are going to be an effective part of the evaluations. Doing this would help the foreign expert a lot.

Even though I was serviced well by professional interpreters during this visit I am sure that I missed a lot of important details in the discussions around the table and thus my in-depth knowledge of what is really going on in the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti may possibly be too weak for making such recommendations as I have done it above. If that is the case I apologize for the mistakes.