



fe

Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE

OPSIORU



Agencia Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

Francesco Capello

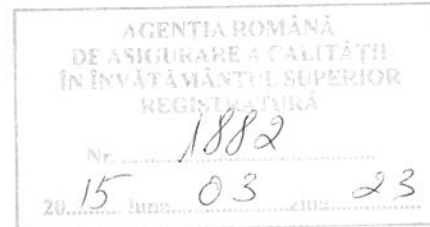
Investește în oameni!

Proiect cofinanțat din Fondul Social European prin Programul Operațional Sectorial Dezvoltarea Resurselor Umane 2007 – 2013
Axa prioritară 1 „Educația și formarea profesională în sprijinul creșterii economice și dezvoltării societății bazate pe cunoaștere”

Domeniul major de intervenție 1.2 „Calitate în învățământul superior”

Titlul proiectului „Dezvoltarea și consolidarea culturii calității la nivelul sistemului de învățământ superior românesc - QUALITAS”

Contract POSDRU/155/1.2/S/141894



External Evaluation of the University of Bucharest

Foreign Assessor Report

SOLICITAT RAMBURSARE
FSE-POSDRU
POSDRU/155/1.2/S/141894
ID 141894

*Report commissioned by ARACIS to
Dr Francesco Capello
Lecturer in Italian and Head of the Italian Department.
School of European Languages and Cultures,
University of Kent (UK)*

26-28 February 2015

PARTENER



EENQA

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN
NETWORK OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



Fondul Național de Cercetare Științifică și Inovativă
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE

OPROSDRU

Framenza Capella



Agencia Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

INTRODUCTION

Having been appointed as Foreign Expert by ARACIS, I wrote this report on the basis of the self-evaluation of the institution, the supporting documentation, and a visit to the institution.

External evaluation procedures are performed regularly once in five years for all higher education institutions working in Romania. The Panel of Evaluators is appointed by ARACIS, an independent expert body, to perform an independent peer review based evaluation of the institution and its study programmes.

The Director of the mission I took part in was Prof. Iordan Petrescu (Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest), and the Team Coordinator was Prof. Răzvan Nistor (Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca).

During my institutional visit, I had the opportunity to meet with the management of the University (including the Rector, Prof. Mircea Dumitru), a number of academic members of staff, and three different delegations of current students, graduates, and employers of UB graduates. I also visited the premises of the Faculty of Sociology, one student dorm located in their vicinity, the Library of the University of Law, the Rectorate, and the Central Library of the City of Bucharest, to which UB students and staff have access alongside users from other universities in Bucharest. I was also given the opportunity to attend lectures delivered in English, and to review dissertations in my area of specialisation (Italian Studies) written by BA and MA students.

My visit was facilitated by the assistance provided by my two main contact persons, the Vice Rector Prof. Magdalena Platis and the Director of Quality Assurance Prof. Sorin Costreie. I should like to express my gratitude to both of them for their kindness, availability, and unflinching efficiency.

This report is the second of its kind for UB, the first one having been produced in 2009 by Prof. Pierre de Maret following the first ARACIS evaluation procedure. The first report was largely positive, and also offered a number of recommendations. Some of these have clearly been followed: these include Prof. de Maret's encouragement to develop a pedagogy informed by more contemporary practices and tailor the courses portfolio in such a way that they respond more adequately to current needs in society and the job market; his idea of broadening the offer of courses delivered in foreign languages; his suggestion to strengthen poles of research excellence (in this respect, for instance, a new trans-Faculty Research Institute has been created, and three main research priorities have been identified). Other recommendations do not seem to have been implemented as successfully, though one should emphasise that some of them (e.g. increasing the financial resources of the institution in order to promote and foster research) are closely linked to external factors, such as the overall financial situation of the country, which are obviously



Francesca Capelli

not under the direct control of the University. In any case, the first recommendation in the list ('strengthening the internal consistency and cohesiveness of the institution in the service of a strong overall strategy') remains the main point on which the University needs significant improvement – an objective whose achievement appears to depend less on external factors than on the willingness to cooperate on the part of the different parties involved (i.e. the Faculties).

The report contains:

- a brief analysis of the institutional advantages and disadvantages,
- a list of recommendations for institutional improvement and measures that might be implemented to that purpose during the period leading to the next evaluation,
- a few final remarks.



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE

OFICIUL

Emanciparea Copiilor



Agencia Română de
Asigurarea a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

Advantages

- With its 33,000 students, 19 faculties, 20 doctoral schools, and 34 research centres, the University of Bucharest is the largest and one of the most prestigious in the country. Its location within the capital city facilitates interaction with government, companies, and opinion-makers; the University also has a long-standing reputation for its contribution to national culture and public debate. In general, during my visit I distinctly perceived a strong motivation among academic staff and the management of the university to build on these strengths and, within the existing financial and legislative constraints, invest resources and energies in the development of an equally strong international profile for the institution.

- The quality of the teaching provided is of very high standard. Both students and alumni reported that they felt equally or better prepared than graduates from other top Romanian institutions, and to an extent this perception appears to be reflected by their higher-than-average employment rate, as well as by the employers' comments on the first day of the visit. I asked and obtained to attend one of the lectures delivered in English. The course in question was an introduction to International Relations. I was impressed by level of proficiency in English of the lecturer and of the students; the lecture itself, while delivered in a rather traditional manner and without making use of multimedia facilities (which I could not locate in the room) was informative, well-pitched, engaging, and interactive. Students were very much involved in the discussion, and also made constant reference to what they had learnt in another course held by the same teacher in the first semester.

I was also given the opportunity to read through a number of BA and MA dissertations in Italian Studies. They covered a range of different topics, from lexicology to linguistics, translation studies, and literature. The periods covered stretched from Renaissance philosophical dialogues written in vernacular Italian (Alberti) to the nineteenth century (turn-of the century sonnets in Roman dialect) and the present (the contemporary novelist Ammaniti). While the academic standard of those works ranged from slightly-below-average to excellent (but was in all cases appropriate to the level of the dissertation), I noticed that the level of Italian was consistently very good. Above all, I thought that the broad range of periods and topics that the staff of the department was prepared to supervise was remarkable. While I could not observe directly the work carried out in other faculties and departments, the final meeting with the programme evaluators seemed to indicate that similar observations may apply to a significant number and possibly the majority of programmes taught at the University.

In terms of 'pastoral care', students are generally very happy with their teachers, whom they perceive to be available and willing to help even outside the framework of official teaching hours.

There are procedures for course feedback in place, and they appear to have been useful in a number of cases (e.g. assessment methods in some courses have been changed following complaints).

- The teaching portfolio is extremely rich and diversified. Most notably in the Faculty of Modern Languages (where around 30 languages are taught every year), but also in the case





UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE

OPDSDRU

Francisco Capella



Agencia Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

of other faculties, UB is the only institution in the country offering certain subjects. Almost 20 courses, at both undergraduate and MA level and in different Faculties including Physics, Politics, and Modern Literatures, are currently being taught in foreign languages such as (predominantly) English but also French and German. This is a very remarkable feature of the institution: on the one hand, it can prove extremely useful for Romanian students who will develop linguistic skills (both oral and written) likely to increase their competitiveness on the job market as well as their general culture; on the other hand, it may contribute significantly to the attractiveness of the University for foreign students who are initially discouraged to study at Bucharest because they do not speak Romanian.

The number of these courses is likely to increase in the near future, and some of those currently on offer, such as the excellent interdisciplinary MA programme 'Open Mind', are team taught by renowned international experts in the fields. Such assets contribute not only to raise the standard of the teaching on offer, but also to develop the international academic network and increase the overall prestige of the institution. Some of the staff complained (and my sense was that their grievances were not unfounded) that the bureaucracy needed for the approval of new courses, in particular those offered in two languages, was unnecessarily burdensome. While members of the management team pointed out to me that this largely depends on state regulations to which the University is legally bound, there might nevertheless be some space for manoeuvre. In this respect, and more generally, it does seem high time for UB to resort to its political weight and symbolic power (possibly also consortiating with other top higher education institutions of Romania) to exert pressure at government level, requesting to devise a strategy aimed at significantly streamlining bureaucracy, as this seriously drains resources which could be much more productively allocated for research and teaching.

- Several members of staff are research active and publish regularly on peer-reviewed international journals. On an individual basis, some of them enjoy an international reputation and are currently working on projects run together with foreign universities, also giving lectures and participating in research workshops abroad (the main partners include Universities based in Italy, Spain, and other Southern European countries). The newly-founded Research Institute promises to foster research not only by promoting interdisciplinarity and a much-needed collaboration between faculties, but also by recognising and encouraging best practices in research. Clearly the University makes the most of its limited research budget (around € 7,000,000 per year), which is almost entirely State funded, and one of its key current priorities is that of increasing such a budget by becoming more competitive in the area of external grants (e.g. European grants, engagement with private funders). Adequate research training is currently provided to all PhD students through programmes run by Doctoral Schools.

- UB can boost a number of state of the art facilities. I was particularly impressed by the new building of the Faculty of Sociology, where the quality of lecture theatres, seminar rooms, common rooms, administrative offices, and laboratories was nothing short of



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



fe
Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013

Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE



Agencia Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

Francisco Capella

excellent. Very few of the rooms were in use at the time of my visit, but I understand that the building (financed for 75% by the State, for 12.5% by private funders, and for the remaining 12.5% by the Faculty's own budget) is brand new and not yet used at its full capacity. While (strictly speaking) not a UB facility, the Central Library is also available to all UB students and staff, and it is a truly spectacular building vaunting a significant collection of books and access to some of the main research databases. The premises of the Rectorate, which I also visited and which were in fact used as a working and meeting place by the ARACIS team, are located in one of the most important University buildings in the country, and many of its rooms (including the lecture theatres which I took the opportunity to visit during breaks) are generally quite impressive.

From the self-evaluation document and students questionnaires it has emerged that the quality of accommodation is hugely variable, ranging from excellent to frankly problematic in some instances. Restoration works are needed in several student dorms across the city, but these will require some time due to financial constraints.

- The employability of students is an issue to which UB has given a lot of attention in recent years. Among other things, this has led to the development of a Careers Service which offers tailored career counselling also through appointments with a psychologist who gives students the chance to sit a number of relevant psycho-attitudinal tests. A Career Day is also organised every year: there is normally a lot of interest on the part of students to take part in it, but unfortunately attendance is currently still limited (around 100-120 students) due to short staffing problems in the Careers Service team. Another sign of the University's willingness to engage with the labour market is that, in recent years, it has been prepared to set up courses for which employers had made clear there was a high demand. The fact that links with institutions (e.g. the Association of Psychologists) who occupy an 'intermediate' position between the Faculties and the job market are constantly established and developed is another sign of good practice in this respect.

Disadvantages

- The main disadvantage of UB is, as it were, structural. The Institution has a well-defined public identity and enjoys an excellent reputation in the country, as well as a growing international prestige. However, internally and at an operational level it appears to be fragmented in a plurality of subunits (the Faculties), each of them following different procedures in a number of key aspects of administrative practices, which also has consequences on the provision of teaching. These aspects include, among others, the admission process: not only is this carried out in very different ways from Faculty to Faculty (which might be partly justified by actual differences between disciplines, though this argument would not hold, for instance, with most of the humanities), but it also seems to present significantly different levels of difficulty. This has been explained making reference to the highly variable degree of competitiveness for entry to one or another faculty, and to an extent such a situation is a direct consequence of how the Romanian higher education system is organized— but the fact remains that prospective students would



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ

Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICEAgenția Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

Francesca Cayella

probably not need to be exposed to very different entry criteria if admissions were managed centrally with standardized criteria valid for all Faculties. Moreover, if the level of difficulty of exams were standardized, nothing would prevent faculties to subsequently offer the number of places they wish to offer to the candidates who have performed better. Instead, with the system currently in place the reputation of 'difficulty' of some admission exams may have the unintended consequence of discouraging very good but not-so-confident students from applying to their preferred faculties altogether (to the detriment of both students and faculties, with the latter potentially depriving themselves of excellent candidates).

The lack of institutional cohesiveness between faculties also has the consequence of making it quite difficult for students to take optional courses from faculties different from their own. For instance, it would prove complicated for a student of languages to take courses in (for instance) anthropology or history of art, and this significantly affects students' opportunities of acquiring a more flexible, diversified, interdisciplinary educational background. In the long term, and considering the current trends in the job market, this may seriously hinder their competitiveness regardless of their intellectual talents and achievements. To my mind, this is a problem that is in well the remit of the university to solve, and I would strongly encourage the management of the institution to take every possible action in this regard.

In general, procedures for data collection and assessment also seem to be quite different across faculties, and this aspect, which was confirmed during the visit, was already observable in the self evaluation document itself. It is my impression that a more developed process of standardization and general coordination of the administrative and didactic practices shared by all faculties might represent an extraordinary asset for the University and its future development.

- The meetings with current students, alumni, and employers have made it clear that a model comparable with the British Joint Honours degree, or the American Major/Minor system, would not only be greatly appreciated for intellectual/academic reasons, but extremely beneficial on a more practical level. Indeed, in recent years, in line with the rest of Europe, the need has emerged also in the Romanian job market for greater flexibility and more diversified, less specialized competencies and skills. This need could be easily met by graduates in two fields, but at present this formula is not offered by the university. It should be emphasized that the main reason for this is that this possibility does not seem to be allowed by the Romanian legislation, so no short or mid term solutions can be envisaged for this significant problem.

- While there are individual members of staff who are quite productive in terms of research and have also developed an established international profile, it is true to say that research is carried out mainly on a 'voluntary basis'. It does not feature among the contractual duties of academic staff, who are in fact only paid for their teaching. In some cases, the teaching load seems far too big for a member of staff to be able to put a sustained effort into research-related activities. In addition, there do not seem to be official procedures currently in place to encourage or concretely reward good research (i.e. sabbaticals for staff who have produced major publications, or even temporary relief from administrative duties). The only significant reward for academic staff who are research active is promotion – which from a purely formal point of view may look



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



fe
Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE



Agencia Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

Francisco Capella

surprising, as according to this practice staff end up being promoted on the basis of duties which their contract do not require them to carry out.

Recommendations

- It is absolutely crucial to find a way to facilitate students' access to courses offered in Faculties different from their own.
- Grant Application Writing Workshops might be organized for PhD students and early-career permanent members of staff.
- Teaching training is currently provided by the Faculty of Psychology for all permanent members of staff. It would be highly desirable if this were made available also to Associate Professors, PhD students, and all those MA students who have teaching-related duties (e.g. assistance in laboratories etc.), especially considering that, put together, they represent a non-negligible percentage of teaching staff.
- More effort should be made in advertising the University abroad in order to attract more Erasmus students. At present, about 1.5% of UB students goes abroad on Erasmus programs, but only half of that number is welcomed to UB. One of the reasons for this is quite probably the fact the Romanian is not a widely studied language, but a stronger advertising activity especially in countries where Romance languages are spoken might prove beneficial.
- Courses of academic writing in English should be introduced for all academic members of staff and PhD students, in order to make it possible for them to stand better chances to publish in international journals. Some steps have already been taken in this direction, including specialist classes offered by staff of the *Times Higher Education* based in Bucharest. However, these still appear to be rather sporadic initiatives.
- From the meeting with students and alumni the need has also emerged for courses of academic writing (in Romanian) from the first year of studies.
- More effort should be made in terms of establishing a long-term, sustained contact with UB graduates forming a community of alumni. Among other things, this would enable UB to keep track of their activities more effectively, and therefore have a clearer idea of their career development as well as of the current trends and needs in the job market. A better developed alumni community would be highly beneficial both in terms of the network the UB would be able to offer to its current students, and in terms of the ongoing, constant reshaping of the teaching offer in view of the job market trends. In particular, in the light of the meeting held with employers in the first day of the visit, I would recommend to invest some resources for the



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI ȘI
CERCETĂRII
ȘTIINȚIFICE



Agencia Română de
Asigurare a Calității în
Învățământul Superior

Francesca Capella

development of a database containing the CVs of students in their final years and of recent graduates. This should be made available to employers.

- In some instances, external PhD assessors may have as little as 30 days to read and comment on a PhD candidate's final dissertation. This seems far too little time, and in my view university regulations should not allow this. A minimum period of at least two months should be established.
- The possibility of establishing a scheme of sabbatical leave (which may even consist in temporary relief from administrative duties, if teaching relief is not viable for legal reasons) should be seriously explored, as this would constitute a powerful encouragement to carry out good research.

Conclusions

The University of Bucharest plays a crucial role not only in the Romanian academic community, but also for the society and the economy of the country. Its graduates are amongst the most likely to find employment in an increasingly difficult job market, and indeed they are well equipped to face the challenges that competition entails at both a national and an international level. The teaching staff is generally well-qualified, enthusiastic and dedicated to students, and some members of staff have also developed an international research profile that benefits the prestige of the institution. There is a clear sense of pride amongst staff and students alike for belonging to such a revered institution.

In this report I have also highlighted a number of problems. Some of these (most notably those linked to financial resources) may require a long time to solve, but for others there seems to be some more space for effective intervention in the short term. My list of recommendations is informed by the wish to focus on what can be achieved with relatively little resources and in the short to mid term.

Overall, in my encounters with members of the management team and with the academic staff at UB I received a strong impression that there is willingness to work hard to maintain the considerable strengths that the University certainly has, as well as to engage constructively with current problems. In view of these considerations, as well as of the observations made during my visit to the Institution and reported in the pages above, I believe that the University of Bucharest should be granted the highest degree of confidence.

Colchester, 18/03/2015

Francesca Capella