



MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2012

Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 17 October and Friday 19 October 2012. In this process as a foreign expert evaluator I was responsible for establishing an overview of the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA and I was focusing on the main points of continuous improvement of quality and future development aspects with outlining the main dimensions of present and future challenges of the university. Before the three day long visit I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. During my stay in Timișoara with the help of the colleagues of MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA I had the possibility to insight the documentations of the evaluation process and to collect useful and important information about the university.

Background

“Mihai Eminescu” university of Timișoara, with its headquarter in Timișoara, on Bv. Revoluției 1989, street 19, code 300036, Timiș county, is a higher education institution, a legal entity of private law and public service, part of the national system of education in Romania.

Timișoara where this university exists is the capital of Timiș County and with its more than 300.000 inhabitants the town is one of the largest Romanian cities where there are several private and state universities offering wide selection of higher educational programs at different levels. The MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA which was founded in 1992 is one private institution from this supply. The founder of the university was Mrs. Reghina Lut who has played and still plays an active role and influences the life of the university. The motivation of the foundation and the main purpose of the university was, as it can be read in the English version of the self evaluation report, *“to perform higher education in the fields of economics and psychology, with special interests in the preparation of highly qualified specialists in these areas, in the preparation for life of active citizens in a democratic society, as well as in preserving and developing a strong foundation of complex and advanced knowledge, through teaching, learning, and research. It also has the goal to prepare students for the sustainable employment.”*

From 1992 the institution had managed to follow up the local market needs of transition economies as in the 1990s there was a great demand for graduated laborforce and good competencies in many fields, like everywhere in Central-Eastern Europe. The market needs had resulted relatively great number of students for almost 15 years which had been guaranteed the financial stability, sustainability, and the successful and uninterrupted operation of the university. The institution has focused on full time education programs and has offered relatively wide range of education programs at BA and MA level. It is important to point out that beside the younger generation many adults have attended the different programs as the flexibility of the institution let them to attend full time programs at BA and MA level. After this successful period the market needs were changed parallel with the growing activity of the other local universities in Timișoara who were often offered the same education programs. These

processes resulted significant changes in the number of students, and the financial sustainability of the institution has become more and more difficult from 2007-2008. The university had to close its highschool and had to give up its earlier center and move to the building where it is operating right now.

Juridical framework, mission and objectives

In 1992 the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA has been set up as a higher education and research institution with a private, non-profit character, and the university started to establish the present educational programs and specializations. The university has three faculties (but only two has students and is operating right now). Most of the offered programs have only a temporary functioning authorization. Strategic objectives can be found in the self evaluation report of the university certainly contain general information about the objectives, universal plans and future diversification paths but these aims seem to be not correspond with the reality and not reflect correctly for the available resources of the present situation and contain many inconsequences.

This university is a small university which offers relatively popular programs basically in a more flexible way than the other universities in Timișoara. The university is operated in a building which is not suitable enough to meet the demands of students, the educational programs and the administrative processes are run by a small group of full-time staff, the financial stability is not secured correctly as the number of enrolled students is less from year to year and parallel with the decreasing demand the local competitors certainly offer more attractive possibilities to learn. Of course this situation is not desperate totally but to get a better position the university needs to invest to the infrastructure, human resources, needs to work up proper processes, has to develop new and attractive programs for the potential students, has to set up (new) connections with the

employers and businesses, has to increase the efficiency and competitiveness of the didactic field; has to develop scientific research; has to develop, perfect and diversify the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students; there is also an urgent need for permanent and dynamic development and continuous modernization of educational programs, professional framework, and infrastructure. It is obvious that to reach these aims (like I mentioned, most of these objectives are in the list of objectives in the self evaluation report) needs time, systematic work and money – it is impossible to implement them from one day to another, and without a strong financial background and strong and committed management it could be hardly realized in a longer period of time (from this point of view it would be much easier if the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA were a faculty of a greater state running or private institution: in a situation like that the institution certainly would have more time and more secured financial background to start to develop and reposition the institution).

It is important to note that MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA as a private institution has to cope with the challenges of a competitive higher education market, national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields and it has to offer attractive study programs which are really based on the demands of the students. We could say that the students are the key elements of these processes: besides the donations, sponsorships, grants and other possible researching resources they are the ones who could 'produce' the own resources and make the system sustainable with their fees.

Management, organizational structures, human resources

According to the information and written documents the academic and the administrative management of MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA in certain aspects do not have the appropriate competencies to do their work

correctly. As a relatively small institution, the appropriate and expected managerial structures and other organizational units of the university has to operate the same way like a greater university. The operation of an institution must rely on a system of regulations, procedures and tools covering the whole set of university life parallel with the permanent evaluation of the different types of programs, teaching staff and other personnel of the university.

According to the self evaluation documentation of the institution the scientific potential and quality of human resources of MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA are on a good level. Beside the small number of administrative staff the present full-time teaching staff of the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA is counting 11 teachers (1 professor, 3 senior lecturer, 7 lecturer, out of whom 6 hold academic title of PhD and 1 is going to be a PhD student.

My personal field experiences show that there are some colleagues who have proper competencies, qualifications, and academic degrees which certainly result a good level of performance in education processes, and the others – so, I have not had the possibility to meet and speak with them in the three day period of evaluation. I think that in case of a relatively small institution, it would have been much better to meet with all the full-time staff and might be with some colleagues who teach in the different programs but not full-time employees of the institution, but certainly bring their important contribution to the teaching programs with their specific knowledge, field expertise and competencies.

It is important to remark that the present building does not ensure separated place and space for all the teachers who are working here, and without these important spaces I do not think that the full-time staff and other teachers from outside of the university spend lots of time in the building which is certainly not

good, as there is no private and separated place to make the preparation work for classes or there is no place for doing research activities.

Educational programs

The evolution of educational programs from 1992 show that the main focus of the university has remained psychology and economic studies although certain changes have occurred by developing, perfecting and diversifying the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students. As a result, some of the earlier offered education programs had been terminated (Faculty of Letters) and new education programs (MA) has been developed. All the present BA and MA education programs are seem to be still marketable although the number of students is decreasing in the last 4 years and most of these fields are not very 'special' as these programs can be found in many private and state higher education institutions in Romania.

The university has implemented the Bologna Process principles (the first and the second level), which allows the institute to connect to the European Higher Education Area. To meet the needs of the students the university has developed new MA programs in the last few years although the growing number of MA students is not compensating the decreasing number of the BA level students and the total number of students is not reach the maximum number of students who can attend the different educational programs. Right now all of the offered programs are accredited or authorized to function temporarily. These programs are offering learning possibilities not just for younger people but even for older generations who are working somewhere and attending the courses in the same time. Opinions in connection with adult education are certainly differing but growing and growing number of adults are learning everywhere in Europe and require different assumptions and more flexibility to adjust the learning processes to the daily working activities or family commitments (it is important to point out

that this university does not manage this special segment as an important strategic group of students, although it could be a diversification path to focus more on adult learning).

As a part of the evaluation I was participating in a meeting where the employers made remarks and shared experiences about the university and its graduated students. Only a few employer came but it turned out that students have a very little field experineces and from the university side the university has not really worked to establish these connections, it has no written agreements or contracts with companies, public institutions, or nonprofit organizations in connection with training and field work. The lack of these well operating connections is not rise the quality of the education processes, but certainly could be very useful tool to improve the level of practical knowledge beside the theoretical parts.

The MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA also has informal connections on the field of Master studies with an another private university in Timișoara (Ioan Slavici University) which could be formalized instead of accidental and not written agreements.

Financial activity

As a nonprofit institution, the university is self financing, establishing funds for activity from the annual school tuition taxes, from donations and sponsorships and other incomes. According to the details and the consultations with the staff of the university the financial activities – incomes and expenses of MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA are not well-balanced in the last few years as the number of students is lower and lower form year to year. It is important to point out that without state support MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA has to cover its expenses with its own incomes which means that the most significant part is coming from student fees, and from some other

outside resources (extra budget incomes, loans, donations, grants, money from projects, etc.). The present number of the students and the present amount of fees paid by them seems to be not enough to sustain the university processes in a good level for a longer period of time. Because of the decreasing level of income the institution was forced to move to another (present) building few years ago. It is important to remark that this building is not owned by the university. Research contracts are also not very significant in the institution, so this practically does not result extra budget incomes.

The financial sustainability depends on the future ability to increase the number of students and to find outside resources. To increase this number could not be very easy as the number of students becomes lower and lower because of the demographical loop (just like everywhere in the Central Eastern European countries), and the negative effects of the financial crisis which has reached higher education, even the private education institutions, too. The last factor is certainly the effect of the potential competitors, other universities in the city of Timișoara, the neighbouring cities and regions with similar education programs. If these processes are going to happen in the near future, the decreasing number of students and decreasing incomes parallel with the possibly not eligible results of this evaluation process could result that MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA would be in a big trouble.

International visibility and collaboration

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields a higher education institution has to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment. In case of MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA these connections seem to be accidental, non-formalized and mainly mean the personal connections of the academic staff.

The research activity basically can be seen at individual level. The university does not really promote the teaching staff participation in research programs, and it is not significant to intense collaboration with industrial and services companies, universities and other state institutions.

The university has a review with scientific character: The Annals of "Mihai Eminescu" University of Timișoara, where full time teachers, associated staff members could publish their new results and this review is open for other scholars at the related fields.

The University has not entered to the ERASMUS program. It would be very important to enter into bilateral contracts with European and also with non-European universities and increase the number of students and staff members taking part in mobility activities.

According to my personal experiences there is a discrepancy between the report and the reality: there are no national and international conferences organized by the university, and the level of scientific activity is also less than it is stated in the English version of the self evaluation report.

Material resources

A space of 607 square meters intended to exclusive use in education and research (including spaces for offices and library). In this space there are lecture rooms, seminar rooms, 2 laboratory and 2 reading room with 30 places. The present situation is that MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA has not have a good material base for education. The equipments and installations in connection with the educational process are not seem to be an important priority and do not supply the demands of students quite well (even the traditional

blackboards are missing in some of the seminar rooms!). The 2 restrooms of the university only can be reached through the 2 lecture rooms, which I think is not acceptable in a higher education institution. The present building is a three-story building which is located very close to the center of the city, and it is certainly well accessible but in the present state it is not suitable for a higher education institution – just with systematic reconstruction would meet the needs of the students and the staff.

Students, public information

The University is not offering a wide range of social, cultural and sport services for students, although there is a social scholarship which is awarded annually, and according to the self evaluation report, 20 students get this scholarship in every year.

The public information can be found on the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA website, which could be one of the most important parts of the communication with the external environment including information about the main aspects of the education process. The website is only in Romanian language.

The promotion of the image of "Mihai Eminescu" University of Timisoara is done through media (publications in the written, audio and video mass-media), through the UME site, and specialized events, for example the university also organizes and Open Doors Month, every year in May.

Conclusion

My report is based on what I have experienced; what I have seen, what I have read and have heard before and during my visit. To summarize my remarks and

observations, on the whole I think that the activity of the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA doesn't meet the needs of the individual's educational and professional training specific standards, as well as the standards of education and scientific research. The present situation of the university is not reach the level of limited confidence.

The earlier mentioned decline of the total number of students could have resulted a decision making situation much more earlier when the management of the University would have had to think about the future, even if there was a relatively strong foundational background behind the institution. Similar to other economic, social or environmental situations, it could be an important question to start to change the given processes without intensive negative feedbacks or the changes only happen as an effect of the negative processes? Of course it is very simply to say that the first variation is better, because there is basically no guarantee that an university would make good decisions or manage to choose correct diversification paths, but I think that in a situation where certain signals has showed that the future sustainability of this private institution has not been that stable as it was few years ago, the management of the university would have tried to cope with these challenges. Unfortunately, it seems that in the situation of the MIHAI EMINESCU UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA these processes did not start in time, and the present unfavorable state is basically the result of that false reading and poor performance.

I think this private university was focusing on maintaining somehow the more and more worsening situation without any significant change and tried to manage their remained resources to keep the system work somehow which in a given level still meets the needs of the present students, employees and external partners. There are certain signs that there were some attempts to find potential diversification paths (for example to start new Master programs), but it seems that at the time of

the present evaluation these activities does not show convincingly the sufficient level of operation for a longer period of time.

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