Introduction

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for the institutional evaluation procedure focused on the Nicolae Titulescu University (NTU), Bucharest. The evaluation visit took place on May 17-19, 2017 and it was preceded by a close study of the English version of the self-evaluation report (SER) issued by the NTU. During my stay in Bucharest I had the opportunity to co-operate closely with Romanian colleagues – members of the evaluation team, and I also benefited from a very helpful assistance of Ms Mihaela Bajenaru, the ARACIS officer who participated during the whole period of the study visit. Throughout the whole process I had the chance to talk to management of the NTU and its faculties, to academic as well as non-academic staff members of the NTU, to students, alumni, employers and some other relevant bodies. Besides the SER I also studied other relevant documents that were willingly provided by the NTU upon my request (especially more specific information as for the budget, research activities, and internationalisation). Finally, I had a chance to see the NTU premises, including the student dormitory.

This way, I have obtained a relatively complete picture about main areas of activity of the NTU and its parts, and this report is based on all the information received. The report is provided with the purpose to give outsider´s view to the NTU. Recommendations are not to be understood as criticism, rather they are meant to serve as a contribution for possible consideration when thinking of further improvements of the NTU´s functioning.

Mission Statement

The NTU is a well-established private university that seems to play a significant role in higher education market in Romania.

Mission of the NTU is clear, sufficiently ambitious but also realistic, and it mainly relates to education, research and also the third role of the universities. The NTU is active *"...to train specialists in the fields of law and international relations, economics, public administration, as well as in other domains, so that the future graduates would successfully face the difficulties related to the judicial and social-economic practice; the university also aims at contributing to the promotion and development of Romanian science".* (SER, p. 5)

The NTU's main objectives are logically linked to the mission and elaborate it further with regard to the whole NTU as well as to its individual faculties. The NTU aspires to develop didactical/pedagogical activities, scientific (research) activities as well as activities related to

civic and cultural mission of the NTU. This aspiration is also reflected in the NTU's 2016-2020 strategy as well as in annual operational plans related to the whole NTU, its faculties and other units. This is elaborated with regard to institutional capacity, educational efficiency, and quality management.

Academic Freedom

The NTU declares its link to the principles of European Universities included in *Magna Charta Universitatum* as well as to *Lima Declaration of Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education.*

The university bodies are in line with the law and offer the faculties the respective academic freedom. Nevertheless, NTU is primarily teaching-driven university and the research resources are limited, which can in consequence indirectly restrict the research possibility and academic freedom.

Recommendation:

- Consider development of a new research plan which would especially foster cross faculty interdisciplinary projects; applied research projects with industry and government; internal calls for internal research grants; transdisciplinary student projects.

Academic Programs and Student Management

The NTU has currently three faculties comprising several bachelor and master programs, as well as one PhD study program. The academic programs correspond with the NTU´s mission statement. Also, the academic degrees are in correspondence with the international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum seem to be appropriate to the academic degrees awarded.

It seems, the structure of programs provides sufficient opportunity for independent study, reflection and analysis. The workload required for the academic programs varies depending on the faculty where the student is enrolled but it is manageable for students. The ECTS are calculated well.

Two forms of study are typical for the programs – full-time and part-time (distant learning). Apparently, quite a few students manage to combine their study and work (part-time or even full-time) regardless the form of study they have been enrolled to.

There are clear admission criteria related to all programs at the NTU. Regulations on student evaluation and their progress in studies are also clearly stated for all programs at the NTU. The same can be said about examination procedures.

The NTU declares its effort to foster student-centered approach. This is related to teaching methods but also, for instance, to student involvement in feedback procedures related to teaching (mainly by means of questionnaires). The results from this data collection are

discussed at the NTU´s Senate where students are also represented, beside to some other relevant bodies.

Student association seems to be involved in a number of relevant directions that are synergic to student learning. System of tutors (staff members) appointed annually for students of all programs seems to be a potentially vital element of student guidance at the NTU. Student association is in contact with alumni, this is in some extent true for the NTU staff, too.

There are scholarships provided by the NTU. The budget allocated for the scholarships is derived from the student fee collected – it amounts 5 % of it, considering the NTU´s revenues. This money is used for two types of scholarships: merit-based and need-based ones. The information about this possibilities and also about ways money was used is made available to students.

Some internships are claimed to be mainly part of individual courses.

During the meeting with the students we had a chance to meet enthusiastic and talented people who were very positive as for the programs and the NTU. Also, in principle a positive feedback to the university was expressed by alumni during our meeting with them. Alumni were graduates of different programs across the university.

Recommendations:

- Develop further a practice of involving students and other stakeholders (alumni, employers, and academic staff) in the work of designing and adapting the programs.
- Continue to develop internship opportunities for students and enable a procedure for measuring the quality of the internships, with the involvement of the mentoring teachers;

Research

Research is declared to be an organic part of the NTU´s activity, and objectives of research development as stated in the SER are very clear and acceptable. No doubt, there are visible research-focused activities across the NTU. This is true for some attempts to link teaching and research, to involve students into research-driven activities of the staff. Traditionally organized annual conferences (one for the staff, another one for the PhD students), three academic journals published by the NTU (one by each faculty), and in general also the activities of the NTU´s publishing house need to be mentioned here, too.

There is the expectation to every staff member that s/he will publish one text a year. Staff members clearly do it and some of their publications are of high-rated quality. It seems, for some staff this expectation is relatively vague, though. Perhaps more explicit guidance as for the research could be beneficial. There are research themes defined by individual faculties, but staff research/publications do not necessarily fall into these themes.

Recommendations:

- Increase guidance/leadership of research activities of the staff by emphasizing main research themes/directions, by introducing incentives for individual research projects

as well as by supporting the development of research teams (collaborative research), by encouraging the staff to compete for external research funding.

- Continue improving quality of the journals by elaborating standard review processes, by making editorial boards more international, by attracting authorship from elsewhere (perhaps by developing specific Calls for papers), and more.

International Co-operation

The NTU has the ambition to develop international co-operation and some of its activities materialise this ambition. Gradually, there is a growing number of international agreements signed (lately especially within the Erasmus+ program) by the NTU and some foreign higher education institutions. This is a positive move and it would need to be developed further, since the number of these agreements is still low. Consequently, at the moment, there is still a relatively small number of students who were provided with a chance to spend a study period abroad; the same can be said about relevant international opportunities for academics and non-academics at the NTU. Very low numbers relate to incoming students and academics, too.

The Erasmus office has been established at the NTU and there is surely a perspective for the development. The NTU seems to have a good offer of courses in English for incoming students.

Internationalisation of the research is having a potential for further development, too, and this should be realised. Conferences organized at the NTU have in certain degree an international nature, similarly, the journals published by the NTU have the potential for internationalisation, too.

Recommendations:

- Emphasise international dimension as important aspect of the NTU and its main areas of activity – learning/teaching, research and development.
- Develop measures to effectively increase mobility of students as well as the staff (more contracts with foreign institutions, more information to students/staff, stimuli for students/staff, financial incentives, integration foreign experience into the NTU´s study programs´ curricula, and more).

Staff

The NTU has a number of distinguished professionals among its staff, some of them with an extraordinary practical experience in top positions in the relevant spheres/areas. This needs to be acknowledged. Apart from this there seems to be a sufficient number of staff of an acceptable academic quality. Students as well as alumni were very positive about the staff and its quality.

The staff development support seems to be limited as for the development of pedagogical/didactical skills as well as the research methodology at the NTU.

As for the teaching, there seems to be a need to continuously improve quality of teaching by providing academic staff development opportunities explicitly focused on teaching area. Such a practice is becoming an integral part of modern universities and no doubt, the NTU wants to keep up with these developments. The same can be said about research skills of the staff.

Recommendation:

- Consider possibilities to provide staff with development opportunities, both in their teaching skills, and in their research methodology skills.

Organization and Management

The NTU is well-stablished private university which consists of three faculties: Faculty of Law; Faculty of Economic Sciences; and Faculty of Social and Administrative Sciences. These faculties act in relative independence as concerns the study programs-related activities in particular.

At the same time, there seems to be a relatively centralised organisation of many other significant aspects of the NTU's life, starting from finances. This has its limitations, on the other hand, it enables to keep global perspective and harmonisation within the whole institution where different programs seems to enjoy different level of interest among potential students.

Consequently, one can also see elements of institutional integrity at the NTU. This is partly related to the structure and division of responsibilities, partly to some other aspects of the university functioning.

The management system seems to be well thought over, emphasizing the university level but also distinguishing levels of the faculties and departments. Apart from executive bodies, there are also bodies of governance and in some extent also bodies of self-governance, incl. student participation.

Recommendation:

- Consider possibilities of decentralisation in management system of the university providing more autonomy to the deans/faculties.

Finances and Infrastructure/Space and Equipment

Finances are centralised at the level of the university. There are several main sources of income: study fees, sponsorships, grants (incl. conference fees), rents (dormitory).

In general, the infrastructure available is on a good level. As for material resources, the university benefits from roomy and sufficiently equipped building and rooms that make the study programs possible. Facilities for research are to be developed further. For students, there is the dormitory nearby the university building and it serves well to basic student needs.

Information system is helping not only to studies (especially to part-time students) but also to administer different aspects of the university´s life. While at the moment it is perceived as sufficient, more attention and progress will apparently be needed in the near future. The same goes as for the study conditions of part-time students. The library is helpful, more development might be needed in it soon, too.

As already mentioned, there are two basic scholarships schemes available at the university – merit- and social need-based ones. Perhaps more variety would be needed – for instance to support student research and mobility.

Recommendations:

- Continue on with the development of information system supportive to learning and teaching.
- Continue to determine explicitly research funds and funds for internationalisation.
- Consider development of more elaborated system of scholarships.
- Consider possibilities of partial improvement at student dormitory – for instance by introducing study room(s), by making Wi-Fi connection available, and by promoting students self-governance elements for the dormitory issues.

Quality Management

The NTU has a solid and well organized quality assurance system. It has a clear structure and procedures and policies that are developed have the potential to support development of quality in main areas of the NTU´s operation.

The main focus is on study programs and their realisation, mainly the teaching process and also academic support for students.

Each study program is monitored, evaluated and regularly revised based on the data collected in feedback, but also with regards to other developments and needs.

As I have already mentioned, there are clear procedures related to evaluation of student work, too, at the NTU.

Several forms of evaluation have been developed and implemented, such as student evaluation of the staff, peer evaluation (among the staff), self-evaluation, external evaluation as well as evaluation by graduates.

There are also several bodies established at the NTU that are in charge of QA processes, the Quality Assurance and Evaluation Committee playing the lead among them.

Recommendation:

- Consider further development of quality assurance policies focused on research and its link to teaching, and also on internationalisation and its links to teaching and research.

Final recommendation:

I recommend to provide NTU with institutional accreditation with the rating High Confidence.

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