

The University "Ștefan cel Mare" of Suceava

External Institutional Evaluation Report

2019

Introduction

I have been invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for an institutional evaluation of the University "Ștefan cel Mare" of Suceava (hereinafter referred to as the "USV"). Prior to the site visit I studied the English version of the Self-Assessment Report (hereinafter referred to as the "SAR") of the USV. During the visit, which took place at the premises of the USV in Suceava on 27th-29th March 2019, I could build upon the information I had received about the USV and its operation.

The site visit started with an official meeting with the leading representatives of the USV, namely Professor Valentin Popa, the Rector of the USV, and his team of the top leaders of the USV. This was followed by an extensive tour of the premises of the USV, its buildings, faculties and departments, laboratories, the library and other facilities. To get a more complete picture about the facilities during my stay at the USV, I also later visited student dormitories, the main student canteen and some other premises related to the USV in Suceava.

A series of individual meetings, as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions (functions) at the USV and elsewhere followed during the site visit. I met representatives of the executive management of the USV (across the structure: university, faculties, departments and other units), the president and vice-president of USV's Senate, as well as a student senator, representatives of the USV Quality Assurance Department, International Relations Department, Student Career and Counselling Centre, leading student association representatives, students of all three levels of studies, incl. ERASMUS exchange incoming students. I also discussed with alumni, employers, and some other relevant people. I had a chance to study materials related to leadership, management and governance, budgeting, study provision, research, internationalization, external relations, quality assurance and other aspects of the USV's operation.

I would like to express my gratefulness to Ms. Carmen Mirian, the ARACIS officer, for her very helpful support throughout the evaluation process. Furthermore, I benefited from the highly collegial approach of the whole group of evaluators led by Prof. Dorian Cojocaru (the Mission Director) and Prof. Ioan Calin Rosca (the coordinator of the team of expert evaluators). I would also like to thank to all USV-related people I had a chance to talk to. And last but not least, my thank goes to Dr. Codrut Serban for his interpreting during the different meetings. All this was very helpful.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned, herewith I submit my report on the institutional performance of the USV as I have perceived it. I am well aware that this is a limited view by an external evaluator and a much deeper insight would be needed to really comprehend the essence of some of the issues evaluated. My evaluation, as well as my recommendations for possible consideration should be understood as a collegial attempt to provide the USV and ARACIS with opinions aiming at contributing to possible improvements at the USV and the quality assurance of higher education of Romania.

Mission Statement

The USV is a public higher education institution and it is well-established in the context of Romanian higher education and a leading university in the North-East region.

Its mission is clearly formulated, sufficiently elaborated, ambitious and acceptable. Furthermore, it is balanced in its three-fold focus: education, research/development and the broader social role of the USV.

Specifically, the mission of the USV is “to promote and sustain the creation and dissemination of knowledge through education and continuing training, research and innovation, human development and entrepreneurial education of national and international standards.” (the SAR, p. 2). Besides this, it also reflects the third role of the universities by emphasizing that “As a Romanian institution of higher education, situated at the crossroads of major European cultures and civilizations, the USV aims at preserving and favouring the cultural diversity of this region, at promoting multicultural, plurilingual and interconfessional values and at strengthening the ties with Romanians abroad, especially those residing in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova” (the SAR, p. 2).

The set of strategic objectives follows in the USV documentation, mainly focusing on all the main areas of the operation of the USV. The strategic plan for 2016-2020 well correlates with this mission and objectives.

I find these USV documents complementary, they constitute a solid basis on which the activities of the USV may be built and further developed.

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is stated as the prominent item in the list of values on which the mission of the USV is based.

It is declared that “The University Code of Ethics clearly affirms the ideals, principles and moral norms the members of the academic community agree to respect and follow in their professional activity and helps create a climate based on cooperation and competition, along with the growth of the university’s prestige... This code promotes moral values such as: academic freedom, personal autonomy, justice and equity, professionalism, honesty, and intellectual probity, transparency, respect and tolerance, responsibility, goodwill and care.” (the SAR, p. 4)

The issues of academic ethics are dealt with by the Ethics Commission of the USV.

The bodies of the university seem to be in agreement with the legislation and provide the faculties with the respective academic freedom.

Academic Programmes and Student Management

The USV has been providing a relatively large variety of study programmes at three levels (bachelor, master, as well as PhD and post-doctoral level). According to the information on the web, a total of 85 study programmes is currently offered at the USV. These programmes are mainly implemented in a full-time form, some of them also as part-time ones.

The catchment area is not only the North-East of the country; it also includes students from the

Republic of Moldova and from Ukraine, as well as students from some countries of the so-called third world. Foreign applicants for programmes in the Romanian language are offered a one-year preparatory course in order to master the language.

Some lifelong learning courses are also offered by different USV faculties and their parts, and these programmes were appreciated during the meeting with the employers and alumni, for instance.

The academic programmes seem to be in compliance with the USV mission statement, as well as with the international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum may be viewed as appropriate for the academic degrees awarded. The programmes are continuously updated and they mostly correspond with current needs, as it was, for instance, expressed in principle during the stakeholder meeting, as well as the meeting with the alumni. Of course, an appeal to emphasize a slightly more practical component in the curricula was occasionally voiced by representatives of employers and some of the alumni, too.

The admission procedures are clear and in line with the legislation, they are well described in the the SAR and also publicly available. The same may be stated about the rules related to the assessment of student results, at the time of entrance into study, in the course of study and at the final exams. Mechanisms enabling students to evaluate the quality of study programmes are appropriate (student questionnaires after each course) and, as the data suggest, students are mostly positive in their assessment.

The USV declares explicit efforts to shift towards student-centred learning methods and some in-service activities for the staff have been organized to promote this move. Efforts to work with students with special education needs may be observed as well, although there is a potential for improvement in this area at the USV.

The ECTS are calculated suitably, students' workload seems to be manageable. Although the curriculum contains a relatively high number of direct teaching hours per week, there is apparently still enough space for independent study. Attendance at the classes is obligatory at the USV, which was a subject of some discussions among students and the university staff during the site visit – some students would prefer to change this rule, it seemed.

Most of the programmes contain an internship element, which is in a number of cases implemented in terms of co-operation of the USV and subjects of the labour market. Again, during the discussions with representatives of employers, as well as with the alumni, the need to emphasize students' practical knowledge and skills, but also their soft skill development was voiced several times.

Students have the opportunity to obtain support from the Career and Counselling Centre at university level. This centre organizes a number of relevant training activities and students may benefit from them. These activities relate to academic and professional guidance, personal resources management, learning in the academic environment, developing attitudes and values and informing students of the first year.

Scholarships to students, both Romanian (based mainly on study results) and international students (sponsored by the Romanian government) are another form of support. Some students are also provided accommodation in dormitories (the demand is higher than the supply at the moment).

Recommendations:

- Continue in the efforts to move towards student-centred methods and evaluate this effort with a strict focus on the essence of this approach.
- Continue in developing opportunities for students with special educational needs so that they are able to carry out their studies on a regular basis.
- Consider the possibilities to regularly involve employers' and alumni's voice in the development of study programmes.

Research

Research is an integral part of the USV operation and its importance has been increasing in recent years.

The USV has developed its Strategic Research Plan 2016-2020 in which specific objectives were formulated, including the increase in the capacity for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, technological development and innovation, logistical, as well as providing financial support for the research development of human resources, the development of an evaluation methodology for the USV staff's research performance, diversification of national and international co-operation in research, stimulation of students' scientific creativity, initiation of new research and development projects (with an entrepreneurial component), the increase of the visibility and impact of the USV research and support publication activity of the university. The focus of the strategy is complex, and yet it successfully stresses important areas of research development.

The achievement of these strategic goals is supported and monitored by the annual operational plans and by annual reports on the state of art of the university. Attention is paid to traditional, as well as new fields of research, to local, regional and national priorities, both fundamental and especially applied research is focused on. The research plans of faculties reflect priority topics and research areas.

In connection with the administration, two units to support research funding were established, namely the Centre for Programmes and Project Management and the Centre for Technology Transfer and Spin-Off Companies.

It seems there has been lively research cooperation of some faculties/departments with businesses and some other stakeholders, which is a promising way of making use of the potential of applied research at the USV.

As already mentioned, special attention is paid to multidisciplinary, as well as interdisciplinary approaches. For this purpose, several Centres and other platforms have been established at the USV and 15 doctoral fields were reorganized in two multidisciplinary doctoral schools: The Doctoral School for Engineering and Applied Sciences and the Doctoral School for Social Sciences and Humanities. PhD studies are developed clearly as research-driven ones, which is worthy of appreciation. At the moment, there are almost three hundred (288 according to the SAR) doctoral students who are supervised by 54 "doctoral advisors" (the SAR, p. 26). In addition to this, a mechanism of involvement of other researchers with outstanding research results into each doctoral project has been elaborated at the USV. This may also be viewed as a solid precondition for the linkage of specific research projects of doctoral students with current research directions at the USV. At the same time, it needs to be mentioned that supervisor training is not performed in a very systematic way at the USV at the moment.

Research activities are coordinated by the Scientific Council chaired by the Vice-Rector for

research and by the Vice-Deans of research coordinators from the faculties at the USV.

The research results, as showed by the number and quality of publications, citations and amount of research grants have been significantly increasing in some aspects at the USV. This is also reflected in the stronger position of the USV in various international rankings of universities.

To ensure quality of research activity, all teaching staff are supposed to write an annual self-assessment report on their own research based on the scoring system developed at the USV. This is later connected with an external evaluation. Results of these procedures influence the proportion of the teaching and research load of each member of the academic staff, affect salaries and are reflected in the academic positions they can obtain.

A number of journals are published by the university, some of them are prestigiously databased. Furthermore, the university publishes a number of texts by the staff.

Clearly, there have been visible signs of development efforts in research at the USV in recent years.

Recommendations:

- Consider the possibility of staff development concerning the supervisors of master and especially doctoral theses (by emphasizing their systematic training).

International Cooperation

The USV has signed the Magna Charta Universitatum and has adopted principles of the Bologna Declaration – in this sense, it is an integral part of the international universities community.

Furthermore, it has its vision and mission that relate to the internationalization of the USV, and based on these documents, the USV has developed a strategic plan for its internationalization. This plan contains seven areas of internationalization development at the USV: (1) student mobility; (2) staff mobility; (3) partnerships and cooperation; (4) the USV internationalization at home; (5) the internationalization of research; (6) the administration and management of international activities; (7) institutional communication and promotion. More detailed plans for each of these areas are appropriate.

As already mentioned, the USV has an ambition to play a significant role not only regionally and nationally, but also in an international context. This does not relate “only” to the Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the ambition goes beyond this. It can be said that the internationalization is viewed as an important aspect of the USV operation.

Specific attention is paid to students from the Republic of Moldova, who are treated in a very friendly regime. Besides, there are students from Ukraine (mostly those using Romanian as their mother tongue) and some students from other countries, such as Turkmenistan, China and so on.

The Erasmus exchange is in place but apparently with some problems. During discussions with students it turned out that, like at many other universities in Romania and abroad, students often hesitate whether they should participate in the student exchange programme or not. This phenomenon seems to be a problem caused by a complex set of reasons.

I also had a conversation with two incoming Erasmus exchange students. They were satisfied with their stay, the teaching mostly occurs on an individual basis, though, there seems to be a very limited offer of subjects in English for these students at the USV. Their integration into the student community may also be a problem, and their impact on the internationalization of the institution then seems to be limited regardless of the efforts to help them individually (also by the means of the so-called Erasmus buddy – local students assisting them in various aspects of their study and stay).

Internationalization is supported by the Department of International Relations, which organizes a number of interesting and lively initiatives and events, the USV also participates in different international trade fairs and other activities trying to advertise what the USV offers.

The Erasmus staff exchange programme among the USV staff seems to be popular.

As already mentioned in the section Research, internationalization of research is one of the priorities and some steps towards this end have been undertaken.

The English version of the USV website is, in principle, supportive, however, websites of the Faculties are available in the Romanian language only.

To sum it up, internationalization gradually seems to be a dynamically developed aspect of the USV operation and recent development trends should continue.

Recommendations:

- Consider the possibilities of increasing the USV student participation in the student exchange programmes (e.g. by using scholarship incentives and flexible individualized study programmes).
- Consider developing study opportunities for incoming Erasmus students in English.

Staff

The USV has a significant number of highly qualified staff in the positions of professors and associate professors. Some of them have excellent experience and results. There is also a significant number of academics from the younger generation at the USV. In recent years, some measures to attract Romanians studying for their PhD abroad have been undertaken – this initiative seemed to be relatively successful and there is an assumption that these academics could become academic leaders in the near future at the USV. Besides, a certain number of international staff members regularly come to teach/lecture at the USV for limited periods of time (individual lectures or block teaching), mostly on the basis of exchange agreements.

Available teaching/academic positions are publicly announced.

Professional development, which in formal terms relates mainly to junior academics and their teacher training, takes place as well.

Students and the alumni were in principle positive about the staff and their quality.

In general, training in research methodology shows potential for further development in some fields/units; the same may be stated about leadership training for staff in leadership positions at various levels, especially the ones who have been recently appointed.

Recommendation:

- Consider the possibilities to provide the staff with more systematic opportunities for training in research methodology skills and leadership training for leaders at various levels.

Organization and Management

The USV is a well-established university. It consists of 10 faculties focusing on different fields. Its main campus is located practically in the centre of Suceava.

The management and administration of the USV are well developed both vertically and horizontally, as well as in other directions across the university. Specific levels of faculties and departments seem to be built and interconnected in a logical manner. Recent changes include some integration, such as doctoral schools and the like. These changes are meant to support the interdisciplinary approach and the more effective usage of resources.

Apart from the faculties, several supportive centres and other units focused on specific aspects/areas of the USV functioning are in operation. They promote the efficient functioning of the main areas of the USV – teaching, research and development, as well as the “third role” of the USV.

In general, the organization and management of the USV is characterised by a relatively strong centre (Rectorate, Senate), where most of the resources and decision-making powers are concentrated. Faculties and their leaders are expected to communicate with the centre about the needs they have and the resources they require to satisfy them. It is well known that such a centralized model, including a centralized budget has advantages, but also limitations and risks.

In general, students are fairly well represented in the USV Senate having their own chamber. The Senate is established at the level of the university but the proportional representation of students from all faculties is guaranteed.

In some extent, the student body is also organized in USV student organizations. There are several student organizations, some of them are open to all those students who are interested, some are focused on specific cohorts (such as students from the Republic of Moldova and from Ukraine). Their activities are focused on different areas of interest, such as education, fundraising, student projects and other activities, public relations and so on.

Funding and Infrastructure / Space and Equipment

The budget of the USV is built on several resources and, in general, the income of the university has been gradually increasing in recent years.

Following the diversification of the teaching and research activities, the sources of revenues at the USV have changed to some extent.

The USV has a number of buildings at its disposal at its campus and there are very ambitious plans to build a second campus on the outskirts of Suceava. The buildings that I had a chance to see were well equipped and may serve sufficiently for learning/teaching purposes, research and other relevant activities. During our visit, we visited a number of laboratories that seemed to serve the

purpose well, too.

The buildings of the campus provide a highly structured space which, apart from some exceptions, can make access for students with some special educational needs very difficult.

The library with its many units also provides appropriate services for students and the staff. It is important to add that besides offering a large amount of professional literature, the library provides access to relevant international databases. The information system at the USV supports the processes of learning/teaching as well as administration. Wi-Fi connection is available all over the main premises of the USV.

The USV has several dormitories/guest houses, some of them have been reconstructed recently and they seem to fit their purpose well. During the group discussion, it turned out that students are in principle satisfied with the quality of the dormitories.

The canteen and coffee house are also part of the facilities providing services of a good quality, which we could experience during our site visit.

The English version of the USV website is of a good quality, although some sub-sections are still “under construction”. The English versions of the websites of some faculties did not exist at the time of the site visit.

Recommendations:

- Continue in the effort to make buildings accessible to students with special educational needs.
- Consider the possibility of making appropriate quality English versions of the websites of each faculty available.

Quality Management

The USV pays sufficient attention to the main processes of the quality assurance (hereinafter referred to as the “QA”), the structure and processes of quality assurance are well developed there. The Quality Assurance and Evaluation Commission is the main body focusing on the quality assurance at the university level and there exists a similar commission at the level of faculties as well. The Code of Quality seems to be a key document framing all rules and regulations related to the quality assurance at the USV. Policies and strategies for quality assurance seem to include management at all of the main levels. They formulate clearly the status and standards of each entity involved in the quality assurance.

Executively, the QA system is coordinated by the vice-rector for didactic activity and quality assurance, who co-operates with the deans, vice-deans and internal evaluators.

Periodic monitoring and evaluation activities are carried out and they are related to teaching, as well as research activities. The main areas of the USV operation are therefore covered in a relatively comprehensive way.

The system of evaluation at the USV is presented explicitly and it is of a periodic nature.

As for student evaluation, the USV has all the necessary regulations and rules regarding student examination and grading. Examination is also an integral part of the design of teaching and learning

activities within the courses/study programmes.

The evaluation of staff performance includes peer evaluation, evaluation of teaching staff performed by students and evaluation performed by the university management.

Altogether, this creates a relatively complex set of evaluation activities that seem to be effectively dealing with the quality assurance in the major processes at the USV.

Recommendations:

- Consider the possibilities of working with the results of the students' evaluation as a part of the dialogue with the student body at USV.

Final Recommendation

I recommend providing the USV with the institutional accreditation rating High Confidence.

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In Brno, on 8th April 2019