

DANUBIUS UNIVERSITY OF GALATI EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2019

Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of the Danubius University of Galati as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 29 October and Friday 1 November 2019. Before the three-day long visit, I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. During my stay in Galati with the help of the colleagues of Danubius University I had the possibility to insight all the documents and annexes of the evaluation process and collect every useful and important information about the university. My report is roughly following the structure of the self evaluation report of the institution.

Background, legal framework, missions and objectives

Danubius University of Galati has been set up in 1992 as a higher education and research institution with a private, non-profit character. In the first years the institution only had one faculty (Law Faculty) and in the next years the university started to establish most of the present educational programs and specializations. The Danubius University, as a private higher education institution, is a part of the Romanian national system of education. Right now, the university has 3 faculties and 31 educational programs.

According to the self-evaluation report and the Charter of the university, the main mission of the institution is to promote knowledge and innovation by providing a unique learning experience, research and development. The university is

permanently trying to increase the quality of activities in order to operate as a well manageable institution at national and international level with integrating the university to the European Higher Education System. The institution is focusing on permanently to increase the efficiency and competitiveness, develop scientific research, developing, perfecting and diversifying the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students, and concentrating on the permanent and dynamic development and continuous modernization of educational programs, professional framework and infrastructure.

The Charter of DUG provides the guidelines regarding the structure, strategy, and principles of functioning and development of the university and regulates its activities. The Charter provisions have been harmonized with both the Romanian legislation and the principles of the European Space of Higher Education. Among the main patterns of the institution there is also a focus on the flexibility and mobility, scientific research, international visibility, continuous improvement and development of the education process and services related to the education, as well as the consolidation of existing specializations, improvement of administrative and financial activity, efficiency, and permanent investment to the university infrastructure and material base of the education.

Although these aims and priorities are basically reflecting correctly to the present challenges of the institution, the offered programs can be found in other Romanian higher education institutions – some of them in Galati, among the educational programs of Dunarea de Jos University of Galati as well. Of course, it is not a necessity for a private higher education institution to develop permanently new programs but according to the fact that in the last few years there were certain changes in the number of students, it would be possible to attract groups of potential students with new educational programs that meet the needs of the market, and these market needs are not static at all.

Danubius University as a private institution, has to cope with the challenges of a competitive higher education market, national and international visibility and recognition on scientific and educational fields and it has to offer attractive study programs which are based on the demands of the students. Students are the most important parts of these processes: besides donations, sponsorships, grants and other research resources they are the ones who 'produce' the own resources of the institution and make the system financially sustainable.

It seems that the answers of Danubius University for these permanently appearing challenges are basically successful, in the last few years the decrease of the number of students stopped and a moderate increase can be seen. On the other hand, it is important to point out that the institution is forced to cope with the market changes and has to work permanently on developing its educational supply to meet the needs of the potential students.

Management and organizational structures

The managerial structures and other organizational units of the university have a transparent, logical structure and it is suited for the correct management of the organization. The operation of the institution relies 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 information and written documents the academic and the administrative leadership of Danubius University have the appropriate competencies to do their work correctly.

Senate of the university includes 15 elected members, 25% of them are students. A Board of Trustees is operating in the university with 9 members, and in the board, there is a representative of the students as well. Academic and administrative structure is described in the Charter of the institution.

According to my personal field experiences the scientific potential and quality of human resources of Danubius University is on a good level. The teaching staff of the university has proper competencies, qualifications and academic degrees which results a good level of performance in education processes. According to the received data, in the 2019-2020 academic year, the University has a teaching and research staff of 105 employees. Associated teachers with temporary employment contract also help the educational process of the institution. It is important to point out that these colleagues with their experiences could make the educational process much more practice oriented.

International visibility and collaboration

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific and educational fields a higher education institution has to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment. Danubius University pays more and more attention for collaboration focusing on countries, universities or other institutions where the main fields of education also appear in educational programs and research activities of partner institutions, in Europe and all over the world. To manage these connections effectively relies on the available financial background, the level of intention to establish and manage real partnerships and cooperation from which the partner institutions could benefit and finally, how much work is invested in managing these relationships properly, if partner institutions have the same level of interest. In case of Danubius University it seems that there is strong intention to rethink the earlier international directions, revise the partnerships and develop and manage real connections to raise the level of international visibility and collaboration.

The university has organized programs in the last few years which have been focusing on international students and helped to raise the intensity of Erasmus staff and student incoming and outgoing mobility as well. There is an International Cooperation Center operating in the university, with a main aim to develop and

implement the strategy of internationalization of Danubius University, as well as to promote its international image, educational programs and research activities in Europe and worldwide. With the participation of the colleagues of the old or newly established partner institutional connections, from year to year there is an interest to organize scientific conferences where the scholars of the partner institutions could participate.

On the other hand, it is recommended to develop joint projects and research activities with these partner universities and make more intensive steps to strengthen cooperation with other universities of the Danube.

Material resources

Danubius University is operating in its own building in Galati 1992 – Galati, Galati Blvd no 3. and has the material base for education processes: classes and seminars halls, laboratories, library, offices, and a small cafeteria as well. The student dormitory is under construction, right now students are accommodated in other locations of the city and the incoming students from abroad are staying in the guestrooms of the university. The material base of the institution is in a proper level and meets the needs of the students. Although the buildings, infrastructure and other facilities serve the educational process well, the university has to spend time, energy and money to keep and maintain these conditions in a good level. The institution also has a publishing house, IT and multimedia laboratories. In terms of social and health problems, the university has provided a package accessible to students and professors through a contract with a major medical center in Galati.

University ensuring good possibilities and provides good conditions for students and for staff members, too. The maintenance of equipment and installations in connection with the educational process seem to be an important priority and meets the demands of students quite well. These investments and developments are financed through the institution's own sources. On the whole, the university meets

the demand of European standards, but it is important to continue the work to invest permanently to maintain and develop the present infrastructure of the institution.

Educational programs

The university is offering BA and MA study programs. Since 1992, a permanent diversification of the educational supply can be seen: in the first year of operation, only Faculty of Law existed, after 27 years there are 3 faculties, 15 bachelor study programs and 16 master study programs on the fields of Law, Finance, Business Administration and Accountancy, Communication and International Relations. In this moment the third level, PhD studies are 'missing' from the educational programs, but a doctoral school is among the plans of the institution.

The number of students has changed in the last few years. The schooling numbers are changing and fluctuating from year to year, but on the other hand, there are certain processes that could be promising, in the last years the number of students has started to grow. Due to the permanently changing higher education environment, needs and expectations of the students, it is very important to maintain the present numbers and attract more students in the next years.

Right now, the total number of students is 2,900, which is more than 25% growth from the 2015/2016 schoolyear. According to the data, in the 2019/2020 schoolyear, 82% of the students are attending BA study programs, and 18% MA programs. The Faculty of Law has the greatest number of students (50%), Faculty of Economics has 27% and Faculty of Communication and International Relations has 23% of the students. According to the trends, the student interest in connection with some educational programs offered by the Faculty of Economics has become more moderate, and there are also some educational programs (English language BA and MA programs on the field of Tourism), where there were no students in the last few years. Although the general trends – the growing number of students – is certainly good, the university has to pay intensive attention in connection with the changes in

the demands of the potential students, and – if the internationalization is an important priority in the future, the institution has to make steps to grow the numbers of students on the existing English language programs and may develop new educational programs to attract the potential students and reflect appropriately for the changing needs.

It is also important to point out that only a small part of students graduated on BA programs continue their master studies in the institution. Although this process can be seen in case of other private and state universities of Romania and Central-Eastern Europe as well, it could be an important priority in the future to attract BA students to continue their studies in this institution.

It could be also a possibility that beside the existing but not operating English language programs to develop foreign language educational programs as it seems that the present human resources allow this development path.

Financial activity

As a nonprofit institution, DUG is a self-financing university, establishing funds from the annual school tuition taxes, donations and sponsorships, research contracts, or other interests. According to the details and the consultations with the staff of the university the financial activities – incomes and expenses of Danubius University are well-balanced. It is important to point out that without state support Danubius University has to cover its expenses with its own incomes. The most significant part is coming from student fees, and from some other outside resources, extra budget incomes. The present number of the students and the present amount of fees paid by them seems to be enough to sustain the university processes in the present level. Annual budget of revenue and expenditure at the institution level approved by the Senate, where the faculties also get resources to cover some of their expenses.

According to the received information, it is important to maintain and increase the present average number of students in the future to make the system more sustainable. If the schooling trends are not going to change in near future, the university would be forced more intensively to find other outside resources, extra budget incomes, or has to find new ways, new education programs or new strategic orientation.

Students, public information

The university offers programs certainly more flexible ways than state universities for adult students and for those who work – this priority makes the institution competitive: distance learning programs, part time learning programs are existing as well, and these forms of education meet the needs of many students in the region.

It is favorable process that growing number of graduated students participate in master programs of the university, although the ratio is still relatively low. According to the data and the meetings with the students as a part of the evaluation process large share of the university graduates manage to find their place in the labor market, although not everyone is working on the fields of their studies.

Students also have the possibility to participate in Erasmus program. The number of outgoing students was 12, and the number of outgoing teachers was 38 in the 2018/2019 schoolyear. These trends could be seen in other higher education institutions in the Central-Eastern European region, and according to the fact that large share of students attending part time or distance educational programs, their interest - because of their work and family - is certainly lower. The incoming numbers in connection with the students were lower than the number of outgoing students (7 in the 2018/2019 schoolyear), but the number of incoming colleagues from partner institutions was relatively high (73) in the same period. This shows the growing international interest in connection with the institution and the new directions.

There is a Counselling and Career Development Center at Danubius University as well. According to the meeting with the students, large share of them take the services of the center. The university is also granting scholarships and some other forms of material support for the students – 100% from their own resources.

The public information can be found on the Danubius University site, which is one of the most important parts of the communication with the external environment including information about the education process in Romanian language. Although an English language part of the university homepage exists, it would be important to widen the reachable quantity of information, if the internationalization remains priority in the future. The university uses social media very intensively to reach present and potential students as well.

Research activities

The importance of research activities seems to be significant in the university and building a brand Danubius is more and more an important priority of the institution. In case of the universities of Central-Eastern Europe, the European resources become more and more important in financing research activities. In the university the Research Management Office represents the operative structure of the management of the scientific research activity. The present project orientation does not seem to be very significant in this moment, so it would be important in the future to pay more attention to participate in research activities, projects and initiatives. Additionally, Danubius University should continue to organize conferences more intensively which could be very important for strengthening the national and international visibility of the institution and beside the 'outsider' lecturers and participants it gives possibility for the students and teachers from the institution to present the results of their own research. Participating in projects and research are not only possibilities for the staff, but for the students as well. Right now, the participation of students is not very significant, but according to the meeting with the students, some of them mentioned

that they would like to take part in research projects if they have this possibility in the future.

There are many international connections of the university which is an important tool to increase the level of international visibility of the institution and could strengthen the scientific research activities of the university as well. The university also uses the advantages of Erasmus in this moment and the importance and proper management of this exchange program and enter into new bilateral contracts with universities give the possibility for students and staff members taking part in mobility activities funded and supported by the EU.

In the last few years new dimensions and directions of international cooperation have started, and there were good initiatives in the last few years, (for example Study&Travel@Ro program), partly related to the educational process but could be important in the future as well. The city of Galati has a special border location and the university could gain from this position, although this institution is not the only higher education in the city and the area, this special role could be a future development direction.

Center of Danubian Studies and Research, Center for Research on Socio-Economic Dynamics in Sustainable Development shows the importance and sensitivity of the institution for possible new directions. The university also has the Danubius University Press publishing academic and research journals related to the study fields which is a good possibility for the teachers to publish their results.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance in education and research is an essential component of the university management activities, as a permanent process and monitoring of all the didactic, education, scientific research and other activities of the university, in

accordance with the legal provisions. Department of Quality Assurance and the Commission for Quality Evaluation and Assurance was established and operates in the university. These bodies are operating at institutional and faculty level as well, and commissions for education quality assessment and assurance and commissions for each study programs were established in the last years. The university also has a strategic plan for the period 2016-2020 and the evaluation of teaching staff by the students is permanent.

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. I recommend the level of confidence rate for the university with strongly emphasizing the following:

- Danubius University should continue to invest in infrastructure and facilities when own resources, and any other funds allow;
- University has to be proactive and have to pay enough attention to the permanent changes (number of students, financial stability, changing needs of the potential students, etc.);
- Danubius University permanently has to manage its existing national and international partnerships and should establish new and operating partnerships with institutions, associations, companies;
- Parallel with traditional roles, universities have to adapt to the new needs of the students where permanent improvement of quality have to be in focus; consider that this type of adaptation needs flexibility and investment in human capital;
- Danubius University has to find its competitive factors with specialization and have to define and find the role and the place in local and international market and attract new potential groups parallel with the traditional markets;

- Present students are belonging to a new generation. Beside the special characteristics of this generation that higher education has to reflect, probably this generation is going to face with the global economic, social and environmental problems and challenges in the next decades: that is the reason why knowledge elements related to sustainability are needed. Danubius could be among those higher education institutions who take seriously the importance of economic, social and environmental challenges and integrate them to the curriculums of the different educational programs.

Finally, I would like to thank to the Rector of the institution and all the university staff for the pleasant atmosphere and the support during my stay in Galati. At last but not least I would like to thank to ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation process in Romania.

Pécs, 11-07-2019

Dr. habil Iván Zádori PhD
Assisociate Professor
University of Pécs
Faculty of Cultural Sciences,
Education and Regional Development