

A R A C I S

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

E x t e r n a l I n s t i t u t i o n a l E v a l u a t i o n

Universitatea Europeana Drăgan din Lugoj, România

F o r e i g n E x p e r t R e p o r t

4th March 2020

em.Univ.-Prof.Dr.Winfried Müller
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria

Peer of several
European Quality Assurance Agencies

1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the Drăgan European University (DEU^{*)} in Lugoj for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from February 26 to 28, 2020. Beside the institutional evaluation, the Bachelor degree study programme “Finances and Banks” and the Master degree programme “Financial Management” of DEU were selected for assessment too. This evaluation of DEU follows the ARACIS visit in 2017, when the institution received the ARACIS rating “limited confidence”.

During the last 19 years I have participated in nearly 50 evaluations of Higher Education Institutions in nine European countries (thereof 25 in Romania), in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence, the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with DEU but also give international perspectives. My focus is on the institution as a whole and not so much on individual study programmes.

I am very grateful to the Mission Director Prof.univ. Dr. Neculai Eugen Seghedin and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ. Dr. Ioan Călin Roșca for conducting this evaluation process in a very efficient and careful way. My special thanks go to the Technical Secretary Mrs. Carmen Mirian from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation and for her friendly way of holding contact with me, providing all necessary information and support for the visit.

I also give my cordial thanks to the Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Dumitru Cornean from DEU for the friendly welcome as well as to Dr. Alina T. Nistorescu for picking me up at the airport and accompanying me during the visit with translations.

2. Organisational Details of the “Drăgan” European University Lugoj

The “Drăgan” European University of Lugoj (DEU) was founded in 1992 by Professor Josif Constantin Drăgan and the “Drăgan European Foundation”. It is a private institution of higher education and research, constituted as legal entity of private law and public service, being part of the national system of education (cf. Law 88/1993, Civil Decision City of Lugoj 1645/2003, Law 100/2003). The University is an apolitical non-profit institution. In connection with the Law of National Education 2011, DEU was ranked among the “teaching and learning universities”.

Lugoj is the second largest city in Timiș County, Banat, in western Romania, only 53 km away from the capital Timișoara of this County. Despite of the small number of students, DEU plays an important role for the cultural, social and economic development of the city of Lugoj and the region, especially in the fields of law and economics.

DEU is governed by the Administrative Council, the Senate and the Rectorate. The Administrative Council is formed by three members, chaired the widow of Prof. Drăgan. The Council takes all important (financial) decisions for DEU. According to the Law of National Education 2011 the Senate provides the legal framework and rules for the operational management of the institution with respect to academic affairs. It consists of 7 members (4 academics and 3 students). The Rector together with one Prorector forms the Rectorate. They are responsible for the operational management of the institution and represent the institution to the outside.

^{*)} In this paper I use the abbreviation DEU for the Drăgan European University, which does also figure in the institution’s email address ...@deu.ro.

The University houses in its own building in Strada Ion Huniade, Nr. 2, in Lugoj, which was constructed between 1993 and 1996. According to the provided information and observations during the visit, the building of DEU is very well kept and very suitable for its purpose. Classrooms and laboratories are equipped properly. The building gives also access to handicapped persons.

DEU is organised in two faculties, the Faculty of Economics with the Bachelor programme “Finance and Banking” and the Master programme “Financial Management” and the Faculty of Law with the Bachelor programme “Law” and the Master programme “Criminal Investigation Management”.

In the academic year 2019/20 there were 414 students enrolled, namely 321 in the Bachelor programmes and 93 students in the Master programmes.

Currently the University has a total of 23 covered teaching positions and 11.31 vacant positions, which gives a coverage degree of 67%. There are no tenured academic staff occupying more than three teaching workloads per academic year.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the tuition-fees of students. According to the provided information the revenue in 2018 was 1.320.000 Lei, compared with expenditures of 1.680.000 Lei, what means a deficit of about 360.000 Lei, which was covered by the Drăgan European Foundation. Without the background of the Foundation, DEU would be in a critical financial situation caused by decreasing student numbers during several years. Hence big investments are only possible by the help of the Foundation.

3. Outline of the Visit

DEU has undergone ARACIS evaluations in 2011 and 2017 as well as an institutional evaluation by the European University Association in 2014. The institution has learned a lot from these evaluations and carried out reforms considering the given recommendations and requirements. Just as in the case of many other Rumanian universities, the existence of ARACIS and the rules set up by this organisation have influenced positively DEU.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Report

DEU has elaborated an Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of 53 pages and 194 annexes for this ARACIS evaluation. The SER has a focus on the main problem of the institution, the small student numbers.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the Drăgan European University (DEU) began in the evening of February 25, 2020, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Hotel Dacia in Lugoj.

During the evaluation visit, I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

Wednesday, February 26

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on February 26 at 9:00 am, in the Senate meeting room on the ground floor of the university building. Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Dumitru Cornean welcomed the ARACIS delegation and introduced the present representatives of DEU (2 Deans, Prorector, Head of Department of General Economy). Mission Director Prof.univ. Dr. Neculai Eugen Seghedin presented the ARACIS team and explained the evaluation procedure. The focus of this visit was on changes and improvements of DEU since the last ARACIS visit in 2017.

In the course of the first day, the ARACIS team performed the usual activities. We visited for about one hour the university building. We started in the basement with the university Library, reading rooms – one equipped with computers - and the Career Centre. Then we visited several lecture halls on the ground floor and the first floor. Some of the visited lecture halls were fully equipped with beamers and computers. We met several on-going classes with small groups of students. On the second floor we visited a big auditorium maximum. Coming down we passed by a computer room, a forensic lab, several seminar rooms and an office for the teaching staff. The existing facilities could accommodate many more students and staff than it is the case at present.

At 14:00 pm I had a private meeting with the President of the Senate Conf.univ. Dr. Sorin Blaj. We discussed the relations and the co-operation of the three governing bodies of DEU, the Administrative Council, the Rectorate and the Senate.

At 14:30 pm I met seven first year students of economics. They were all working beside their studies and did not mention any complaints. They considered DEU as a very good opportunity to obtain an academic education.

In the late afternoon, I attended the meetings of the ARACIS team with more than 100 students, with 27 graduates and with 7 employers. As usual, these meetings did not disclose any severe problems, but demonstrated a strong support for DEU and a high identification of students, graduates and local stakeholders with the institution. Even the Mayor of Lugoj and a high representative of Timiș County participated in the meeting with the employers.

Thursday, February 27

In the morning I arranged a meeting with the Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Dumitru Cornean. We discussed again the co-operation of the Rectorate with the Senate and the Administrative Council. Furthermore, possible simplifications of the internal structure of DEU and extensions of the fields of education and research were reviewed.

For the later morning the ARACIS team had arranged additional meetings with a member of the Administrative Council together with the Accounting Service, with the Career Centre, with the QA Commission and with the Ethic Commission. Before lunch a meeting with representatives of the teaching staff was scheduled.

All these meetings served to obtain a clear picture of the current state of DEU.

Friday, February 28

At 9:00 am the ARACIS team met for a debriefing. The different experts including me gave a short presentation of their findings and views. Afterwards we finalized the documents. The evaluation visit ended with a meeting of the ARACIS team with the representatives of DEU at 12:00 am. Impressions and results of the evaluation visit were presented to the leaders of DEU and further steps explained. Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Dumitru Cornean thanked the ARACIS team for their careful work.

4. Governance and Institution

DEU has a very efficient and well-balanced university management between Administrative Council, Rectorate and Senate, working in a climate of consensus and co-operation without being caught by conflicts. There is a strong support for the institution by the local community. The areas of law and economics are certainly of relevance for the region of Lugoj. The Drăgan European Foundation provides a safety-net in case of any financial problems. The university building is very nice and appropriate for teaching purposes.

But on the European level the institution is too small for being recognized as a full member of the European Higher Education Area. The attribute “European” in DEU is not really justified at the moment. The financial security given to DEU by the Drăgan European Foundation has also the effect that there is not a strong pressure for change. The efforts made in order to attract more students and to work on a strategy of sustainability for the institution in the changing environment seem to be very limited. The idea “small is beautiful” seems to dominate some university members. But the current challenges and problems of DEU will not be solved only by an improved university marketing. Similar to other Romanian universities, also DEU suffers from a lack of institutional co-operations. But given the size of DEU, the development of co-operations with other institutions will be essential for the future of the institution.

As I have already mentioned, DEU has learned a lot from the experience of performed evaluations and the given recommendations. The Self-Evaluation Report is very well written and gives a good view of DEU. The only point of criticism is that there are still some redundancies in Part I and Part II which should have been avoided.

The University management works very effectively and the distribution of power between the Rector and the Senate seems to be completely clear. In this sense the Organizational Chart of DEU putting the Rector under the Senate does not correspond to the reality at DEU nor to the intentions of Law 2011. The Rector and the Senate should be on the same level in the Chart, what would also correspond to the European trend to have universities managed by powerful rectors.

As DEU is very small, the majority of staff members have a big number of responsibilities. Hence it is important to save human resources wherever possible. With respect to bureaucratism and redundancies there seems to be still room for some simplifications. One area at DEU with redundancies are the faculties with one single department. The duties of the Faculty Councils and the Department Councils overlap considerably, as well as the actions of the two Faculty Councils. Another topic concerning the doubling of work I will refer to in the part on Quality Assurance.

There is a lot of space within the building of DEU. But the academic staff has not enough working places where they can prepare their lectures and talk with students. In the same way the working conditions of the administrative staff - partially being placed on a floor without windows - is not worthy for a university. Similarly, the opportunities for students to stay at the University are not the best. I will return to this problem under Teaching and Learning. The main problem of the institution, how to attract more students should be approached immediately. Based on a conversation with an employer I have the impression that the area of New Media and Social Networks linked to the Faculty of Economics and the installation of Computer Science with a focus on Software Engineering could be interesting future extensions.

Recommendations:

- Adapt DEU's Organizational Chart to reality and put the Rector on the same level as the Senate.
- Reconsider the internal structure and avoid redundancies and duplication of duties and decision processes where ever possible.
- Start as soon as possible the installation of new attractive fields for research and teaching. Use co-operations with other universities at the beginning.
- Improve the working conditions of academic and administrative staff at DEU by the adaption of not used seminar rooms and lecture halls for office purposes.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as I have already mentioned on other occasions, an ethic commission composed only by members from the institution - especially in the case of very small private institutions - will not be able to handle sensitive cases like corruption and academic misconduct. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally - an inter-university commission with half members coming from DEU and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Assurance

DEU has set up procedures for quality assurance. The teaching staff at DEU seems to be fully aware of the importance of QA and high-quality teaching. The students take an active part in the evaluation of teaching. An antiplagiarism system has been installed.

However, some procedures for quality assurance seem to be too bureaucratic. There is a University Commission for QA and also a Senate Commission responsible for QA, mainly in teaching.

Recommendations:

- Try to reduce bureaucratic efforts and avoid redundancies within quality assurance procedures. One commission at university level covering all aspects of QA should be sufficient in order to strengthen quality culture at DEU and to comply with the legal requirements.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality and importance of the education at DEU is generally recognized. Neither the meeting with students nor the meetings with graduates, employers and teachers disclosed any severe problems. Students and graduates were commonly positive.

Currently DEU seems to fulfil the requirements set by ARACIS for its study programmes or is on a good way to meet these requirements. But given the size and the profile of DEU it is clear that there are barriers for the realisation of some Bologna ideas and European requirements (e.g. mobility, modularisation of programmes, shift to student centred education, more selective subjects, international projects, etc.). The involvement of stakeholders into curricula discussions seems to be informal and based on personal relations. Participation of students into research is not really visible. Support services for students preparing them for the labour market (mobility programmes, internships, career centre, entrepreneurship, etc.) are not demanded very much by the students, but also not very active.

Students are not motivated to spend more time than necessary at DEU because there are no attractive places inside the building where they can discuss, study and recover. The existing huge reading rooms in the basement are not very inviting and do not provide enough privacy for students.

Recommendations:

- Establish facilities inside the University where students can discuss, study and recover between lectures.
- Include more optional courses into programmes and fully modularise programmes.
- Increase autonomous student work and self-learning parts.
- Involve stakeholders systematically into curricula discussions.
- Increase assistance for students looking for an internship and strengthen the activities to facilitate the start of graduates into the working world.

7. Research and Service to Society

Research is not a very strong point at DEU but there has been made progress to make research more visible. As frequently observed in Romania, also in the case of DEU, co-operations with neighbouring universities and with regional and private actors in research are not very numerous. Consulting activities are not very strong and the few existing ones are more based on personal contacts than on institutional relationships.

Recommendations:

- Expand the co-operation with other research institutions and with enterprises in order to reach critical mass of research groups and to apply for grants from European research funds.
- Strengthen and extend relations with the region. Present examples of good research and consultancies to potential partners. Try to sign mutual contracts of co-operation in order to make income from collaborations sustainable.

8. Internationalisation

As already mentioned, the small size of DEU does not really favour international activities. In addition, the field of law, beside the aspect of European law, is not really an international discipline. Nevertheless, national co-operations in the area of law could be strengthened. And in the field of economics could be done much more with respect to mobility of staff and students, joint study programmes, collaborative research, etc.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility, research collaborations).
- Look for a partner university e.g. in Timișoara in order to co-operate in international activities such as Erasmus.

9. Final Remarks

The excellent university management, the financial assistance provided by the Drăgan European Foundation and the strong support for DEU by the city of Lugoj and the surrounding region should assist the institution to become a sustainable member of the European Higher Education Area. But in any case, some important steps will be necessary in order to strengthen the sustainability of DEU. Attractive new areas in research and teaching should be opened in order to complete the University's offer and to secure the existence of the institution for the future. Co-operations with interesting partners in the fields of research and internationalisation should be made in order to overcome the problem caused by its small size. I trust in the leadership of DEU to handle successfully these challenges. My remarks and recommendations should assist DEU to find its successful way into the future.

Winfried Müller

em.Univ.-Prof.Dr.Winfried Müller