

EVALUATION REPORT – The Institute for Business Administration in Bucharest (ASEBUSS)

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December 2019

Preliminary remarks

In the following pages, I shall avoid repeating general, descriptive points about the Institute or information that can already be found in my predecessor's thorough, instructive report. Rather, based on the data that I have collected during my visit, I shall focus on how the Institute has developed throughout the last six years, what has been improved, previous recommendations that have (or have not) been followed, as well as aspects not covered in the previous accreditation report.

Together with the other members of the evaluation team, I have monitored the whole range of activities normally carried out in Higher Education Institutions, including Admissions, Staff Recruitment, Teaching, Assessment, Feedback (both provided to and received by students), Establishing and Developing Partnerships and Collaborations at both national and international level, Fostering relationships with and between Alumni, as well as the smooth management of the institution's Facilities. The research component is so limited in this Institution – and avowedly so, as the University Mission hardly mentions it – that it will not be dealt with here.

All the Institute's staff involved in the reaccreditation process was collaborative and helpful, and my requests to access documents and data were dealt with promptly and in a friendly manner.

As is well known, the Institution has a rather unique profile within the University system of the country:

- 1) its size, in terms of both staff and students, is roughly comparable to that of a small-sized department in the UK – which is reflected in the limited number of facilities available, but also (and more positively) in the close personal contact between staff and students.
- 2) It only provides courses at MA level but no undergraduate degrees. I understand that this is possible because the bill that imposes Romanian HE institutions to teach at both levels was passed only after the Institute was founded, and cannot be applied retroactively. For this reason, the Institute is likely to remain the only one of its kind in this respect.

- 3) The average age of students (35) is much higher than in other Romanian Universities. The admission criteria also require at least 3-5 years of professional experience at managerial level. In the light of this, the attitude, motivation and needs of students are quite different from those of younger freshmen at other Universities. Some notable differences between ASEBUSS and other HE Institutions with regard to teaching provision, teaching schedule, teaching methodology, and feedback provision are likely due to the Institute's willingness to cater to these different needs.
- 4) Following on point 3, unlike the majority of HE institutions the University's mission hardly addresses any research-related component, as it avowedly prioritises applicability and a hands-on, practical, problem-solving oriented approach. In this respect, the institution's profile resembles that of some British post-1992 Universities (former Polytechnics). I came to understand that there is some debate in Romania on whether a profile such as this fits the overall criteria that define a University (a debate that, again, bears similarities to that of early 1990s Britain). Unlike most British former polytechnics, hardly any significant engagement with research seems to exist in this Institution. Be that as it may, having met groups of current students and alumni, I was left in no doubt that they felt they have received from ASEBUSS what they were looking for – and that the expertise and practical knowledge they gained here is deemed worth of the considerable financial investment they have made.
- 5) Another distinctive aspect of the institution's identity is its strong connection to the US, reflected by its links with Kennesaw State University and (more recently) Washburn University. This aspect characterizes the institutional culture as well as the teaching approach (and contents) of ASEBUSS, and also represents a key component of its brand. I share my predecessor's opinion that fostering EU links alongside the existing US ones could be advantageous in several respects, but have been informed that, indeed, preliminary discussions in this direction are underway.

Admissions

Oddly enough for an English-speaking institution, no English language certificate is required at entry level: however, a 30-minute interview in English is conducted as part of the admission process. Staff report that they are confident that this is enough for them to get an idea of the suitability of the candidate also from the linguistic point of view. I remain unconvinced that an interview alone (and even more, one that is focused on motivation, experience, and business-related topics) is sufficient to assess all the components of linguistic proficiency (aural, oral, written, and reading skills). It is therefore not surprising to hear from teaching staff that the level of English is not always consistent within the various classes,

and that some students needed to be given the opportunity to speak in Romanian on some occasions. At the same time, the professors added that this has never represented a significant problem for the smooth running of their classes. I have examined the interview sheets of both the MBA and the EMBA programs, and in terms of content they both seem fit for purpose.

Interviews seek to test the candidates' motivation, experience and general suitability to the kind of teaching that is provided. Many students come from different professional and educational backgrounds and several of them have no formal education in Economics: however, the selection process seeks to prioritise candidates who have solid business experience and a strong motivation to further explore the practical aspects of business – and in this perspective, as has emerged during our meetings with students, groups can be seen as homogeneous and on the same page.

In terms of student recruitment, ASEBUSS is currently seeking to attract more students from the surrounding areas of Bucharest rather than other more distant cities in Romania. This is due in part to the emergence of competing institutions elsewhere (e.g. Cluj), but also to the desire of having students for which the commuting might not prove too demanding. No particular budgetary concerns were raised by the administrators, who are very aware of the challenges faced by an institution relying exclusively on student fees for its income. I was told that, if the recruitment plans I have mentioned were to prove successful, the extra revenue would be invested in organizing more conferences and facilitating conference attendance for staff: no plans showing an actual strategy to engage more in research activities were provided, in any case. Open Days are held regularly to facilitate recruitment activities.

Assessment

60% of the final mark of each exam is based on class participation and performance, 30% on a final exam and 10% on a test. To avoid subjective bias in marking class performance, some of the teachers make use of grids with bullet points tracking students' answers, interventions and level of engagement, however this is not done consistently by everyone. This would undoubtedly represent a problem in Institutions in other countries such as the UK – where the more evidently subjective elements in relation to assessment are minimized wherever possible so as to avoid potential complaints on the part of students regarding teachers' bias – but this does not seem to have been the case with ASEBUSS. I was told no complaints from students have ever emerged in relation to grading, which is extraordinary for an HE institution – however, it must also be emphasised that no structured, formal procedure for dealing with such complaints appears to be in place. In line with the rather personal and informal style of teacher/student relationship promoted by this institution, potential problems in

this area are expected to be discussed personally with senior staff and on a case by case basis.

I asked to inspect a number of final dissertations and final exams. There was no problem in retrieving the dissertations, but as I understand there is no standard procedure in the country for keeping exams available for external inspection as is the case for instance in Britain. In any case, a small sample of final exams were found and very kindly provided. I am in no position to comment on the contents as my scholarly expertise lies elsewhere, but based on a long-standing experience as external examiner for University College London I must say that the marking procedure is probably the most problematic aspect I encountered during my visit. There is hardly any trace of the staff's marking, so in most cases it is quite impossible to understand what considerations led to grade an exam in one way or another. Exams graded as 6 and 10 may perfectly carry the same amount of marking on the sheet. The feedback provided is minimal and more often than not nonexistent, so students will get very little idea on how to learn from the corrections to their work. The bibliography provided in the final dissertations is in the best cases very limited, and in no way comparable to the quality, quantity, detail, and accuracy that is required for a Masters level degree in other countries (certainly not in the UK or Italy, where I have experience of teaching at MA level). My impression as a complete layman in the field of economics was that in some of the dissertations the argument, however interesting, was developed more like a detailed story than an in-depth, professional scientific analysis (the 2019 dissertation on natural cosmetics is a case in point). At least in part, this may be due to the case-study format that is adopted by the institution as a preferred working method for individual and group work – however, it poses the problem of how to compare this kind of dissertations with the more traditional, research-based kind of work that is required by other providers of equivalent degrees.

Partnerships

As appropriately highlighted in the previous reaccreditation report, a key feature and selling point of the Institute is represented by its close and long-standing ties with Kennesaw State University (for the Executive MBA strand), as well as the more recent ones with Washburn University (for the Entrepreneur MBA strand). Staff from both Universities come to Bucharest at the beginning of each academic year to teach, attend the annual Joint International Conference organized by ASEBUSS as well as the graduation ceremonies. It is not clear to what extent the Joint Conference is also attended by staff from other Universities, but rather than being research-related events they seem to have the function of fostering the relation between institutions and members of staff.

ASEBUSS students travel to the US for their Residence in April in the second year of their EMBA and there they meet in person the students they have been working with remotely throughout the year. This appears to be a much appreciated experience, and also a valuable opportunity for networking. It is unfortunate that, due to new priorities in the American market, Kennesaw students have stopped visiting ASEBUSS in 2013. The Institute has responded to this situation by establishing new relations in the US (i.e. Washburn) and projecting new partnerships also in Europe (i.e. Zurich, which however is just a collaboration at planning stage). I understand that no double degree is offered at the end of the course, but just the ASEBUSS degree alongside a Certificate of attendance of the US partners. Perhaps a pathway to a double degree might be contemplated, and I understand that the option has been discussed for some time – but this does not appear to rank amongst the top priorities at the moment.

The Institute has also established a limited number of partnership with Romanian companies: Romanian Software, City Grill, and Medlife.

Staff and Staff Recruitment

The Institution prides itself on recruiting staff who not only possess the academic qualifications and expertise necessary for pursuing an academic career, but also a long-standing, concrete experience in the business and management sector. In the words of the Quality Assurance Officer, “the recruitment process is very difficult because it is very hard for us to find candidates who fit both requirements”. Indeed, these requirements seem to be perfectly in line with both with the law requirements that regulate academic recruitment in Romania and with the practice-oriented approach of the Institute. Also, accordingly, some of the teaching staff are full time and others part-time, continuing to pursue their business-related activities. The staff/student ratio seems appropriate.

In the course of exchanges held with the other Assessment Team members, I have learnt about a number of problems concerning recruitment practices and their compliance to State regulations. Lacking expertise in these matters, I refer readers of this report to the observations conducted and the conclusions drawn by the other Assessors.

Quality Monitoring/Improvement

In recent years, the Institute has taken action on a number of fronts to respond to evolving needs of the students and the sector overall. The following list, entitled 'Quality Improvements' has been provided on my request:

- Quality Manual is updated on an annual basis
- The Rector or the Dean are attending the classes of their colleague professors and provide feedback for improvement
- We invited Guest speakers from the business community to share knowledge about topics suggested by our participants, such as: Presentation skills, Negotiation, Digital Transformation
- New website was launched in July 2018
- New SharePoint platform was implemented in August 2019
- Signing a new international agreement with Washburn University, Kansas, USA for Entrepreneurial MBA program
- Investment in classroom equipment: new multimedia equipment
- Increase of school visibility and presence in the business environment, increase number of events for alumni and potential prospects

It must be noted that some of these changes, such as the introduction of the Negotiation course, were introduced in response to direct requests on the part of students. In this respect, during meetings with current and former students it has been repeatedly emphasized that throughout the years staff at the Institute has been willing to listen and respond to requests.

During my meeting with the Quality Officer, however, it has also emerged that in the culture of the Institute there is no clear distinction between practices and procedures related to quality. There have certainly been practices put in place with the aim of ensuring improvements in the provision of teaching: however, there do not appear to be standardized, set procedures to regularly and consistently monitor the quality of the offer, and no engagement with external subjects that may be more immune to the inevitable bias that characterizes self-evaluations.

Facilities

The Institute rents its premises in an attractive area in central Bucharest. At the time of the last reaccreditation, it used to have a large teaching room and a standard-size computer lab on the ground floor and administrative offices on the 8th floor. This has changed, and the administrative offices are now also placed on the ground floor – which has improved greatly the experience of staff, who no

longer needs to make constant use of the elevator. I imagine that this may also improve access for potential disabled staff/students, which is an issue raised by the previous assessor. However, I also note that in all these years no ramp has been built to access the building, which again is an aspect remarked upon by the previous external assessor.

Events and Alumni Community

One of the strongest points of the Institute is its community of alumni, currently 1,400 strong. As networking is at the heart of business practices, the Institute is very keen to promote it and occasionally organizes conferences and events where students and alumni can meet and share their experiences. Some of the speakers recently invited to such events include top figures of the European Commission in Romania, of Paypoint Romania, of PricewaterhouseCoopers Romania, Metropolitan Life Pensions, and Daedalus MillwardBrown.

Open House Events are organized regularly to give students the opportunity to orientate themselves in the new program, as well as socialize. Some of these events feature talks by the staff of the Institute as well as of affiliated Universities (i.e. Washburn).

Good practice aspects

In addition to those listed by my predecessor (including most importantly Residence Weeks, Alumni Evenings, Open Houses, free courses for the Admin Team) I would like to stress in particular

- 1) the successful attempt to create a friendly and familiar atmosphere between staff and students;
- 2) the willingness of staff to listen to and accommodate students' requests;
- 3) the determination to create courses that may appeal and be useful to students coming from different professional and educational backgrounds;
- 4) the regular collection of detailed feedback on both courses and teachers. It should be noted that the feedback I have had the opportunity to observe was excellent.

Recommendations made by the Previous External Assessor

I note that only few of the recommendations by the previous external assessor have been taken on board:

- 1) no improvement appears to have been made in terms of accessibility for disabled people;
- 2) no significant initiatives concerning European or European-American collaborations were taken, with the already-mentioned exception of Zurich, which however is still very much at planning stage;
- 3) no collaborative doctoral education project has been pursued;
- 4) no audiobooks seem to have been provided, although more recent text-to-speech technology has been recommended and successfully experimented with by commuting students;
- 5) to the best of my knowledge, the time-management module proposed by the employers has not been introduced

My own recommendations

- 1) Adopting more rigorous quality monitoring procedures involving periodical and sufficiently frequent (i.e. yearly) assessment by external subjects;
- 2) Adopting a more rigorous assessment/marking practice: avoid having completely unmarked and yet graded exams/dissertations, and do provide students with accurate, detailed written feedback on their work, be it exam or final dissertation. Comment on the general quality and contents of the student's piece of work, and then provide a list of strengths and weaknesses so that they can get a clear sense of the areas they should focus on in their future work;
- 3) Making sure that dissertations provide a bibliography, writing style and argumentative structure adequate to the complexity required of a Masters level. While the practical emphasis placed on applicability is a commendable feature of the Institute's teaching culture, it is not in itself incompatible with an awareness of how to develop a research-based argument.

Statement related to the confidence granted to the institution

I propose a "limited degree of confidence" grade.

Recommendation to ARACIS

I second my predecessor's point on the importance of being able to follow the discussions as much as possible, and therefore having the opportunity to get a translator when these are not conducted in English. On this occasion, the majority of discussions were conducted in Romanian, and although no official translator was allocated to me I could always count on the kindness and willingness to help of members of the Evaluation Team as well as ASEBUSS, who often translated or summarized for me what was being said.

Torino, 9 December 2019

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