

CONSTANTIN BRÂNCOVEANU UNIVERSITY OF PITEȘTI
EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT
2021

Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the online institutional evaluation process of the Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești (UCB) as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The online evaluation took place between Monday 14 June and Friday 18 June 2021. Before the evaluation, I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. During the online evaluation with the help of the colleagues of UCB I had the possibility to access 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

Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești has been set up in 1991 as a higher education and research institution with a private, nonprofit character. The headquarters of the university is in Pitești, Calea Bascovului, no. 2A, Argeș County, with faculties in the municipalities of Pitești, Brăila and Râmnicu Vâlcea. After the foundation, the university has started to establish most of the present educational programs and specializations. The UCB, as a private higher education institution, is the part of the Romanian national system of education. Right now, the university has 5 faculties. In Pitești 3 faculties are operating, with 7 Bachelor and 7 Master programs, in Brăila 1 faculty operates with 3 Bachelor and 4 Master study programs, and in Râmnicu Vâlcea the university has 1 faculty and offering 5 Bachelor and 4 Master study programs.

According to the self-evaluation report and the Charter of the university, the main mission of the institution is to generate knowledge transfer to society through initial and continuous training, to meet the needs of the social and economic environment, and to generate scientific research, development, innovation, and technology transfer, through individual and collective creation in the field of science as well as the

capitalization and dissemination of results. Parallel with this, the active contribution to the local, regional, and national development from a social, economic, and cultural perspective through a strong involvement in the community life is also an important part of the mission.

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 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 UCB 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 Area 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.

UCB has a Strategic Plan for the period 2021-2025. The UCB Senate also approves each year the operational plan which contains, within each strategic objective, the tactical objectives, the actions to be taken to achieve the objectives, the ways to quantify the achievement of the objectives, estimated costs, sources of funding, deadline and responsible. Both the Strategic Plan and the Operational Plan have components that directly target the quality assurance policy.

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 Pitești 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.

UCB 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 UCB 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. It is also important to point out that the university is operating in 3 locations in 3 counties where the institution is playing an important role to satisfy the local higher educational demands. On the other hand, Pitești is relatively close to the capital, Bucharest, so it needs a systematic work to permanently attract and keep the students.

Management and organizational structures, teaching staff

According to the self-evaluation report, the annexes and the received information, the managerial structures and other organizational units of the university have a transparent structure and it is suited for the correct management of the organization. To operate the 3 sites is certainly a greater challenge if we compare the institution with other, one-site universities but the university solves and manages this situation well.

The consortium structure of UCB (with faculties in three municipalities) imposed a matrix organization of the compartments within the functional structures. The functional departments (accounting, human resources, administrative) have organized departments both at the central level, of the university, and within the university centers where the faculties operate. This requires intensive coordination between the faculties and the university administration.

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 UCB have proper competencies to do their work correctly.

According to my experiences the scientific potential and quality of human resources of UCB 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. In the Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești, systematic personnel policy and human resources development has been permanently in focus: the university has tried to attract and retain the competent and high-performing teachers and has permanently supported the training and development activities for teachers and other employees.

According to the received data, in October 2020, the university had a teaching and research staff of 65 employees, out of whom 55% are professors and associate professors. It is important to note that 95% of the teaching staff are PhD holders, and the other 5% are doctoral students. 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.

There are several teachers in each subject and if one of them leaves, they can be quickly replaced. Since the UCB has its faculties in three towns (with similar study programs), teachers who cease their work or leave the university can be quickly replaced, even temporarily, by their colleagues from the other university centers.

Educational programs

The university is offering BA and MA study programs. Since 1991, a permanent diversification of the educational supply can be seen. After 30 years, in Pitești 3 faculties are operating, with 7 Bachelor and 7 Master programs, in Brăila 1 faculty operates with 3 Bachelor and 4 Master study programs, in Râmnicu Vâlcea the university has 1 faculty and offering 5 Bachelor and 4 Master study programs. In the 2020/2021 schoolyear, the UCB had 1778 students. 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.

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.

During the virus crisis the university has managed the online education quite well. It is also important to emphasize that some parts of the online education should be kept after the COVID situation is going to be over: from the feedbacks of the students, it seems that some of them prefer certain online practices.

It could be also a possibility to develop the foreign language educational supply of the university as it seems that the present human resources allow this development path.

Students

The university offers programs certainly more flexible ways than state universities for adult students and for those who work – this priority also makes the institution competitive and meet the needs of many students in the region the institution operates.

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. There is many international cooperation and bilateral agreements (18) with foreign universities of Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey. Although the internationalization is not in direct focus, the strategic plan of the institution for the period 2021-2025 contains the development of the international profile of Constantin Brâncoveanu University through strengthening the partnerships with foreign universities and increasing the number of both in incoming and outgoing international students. It is also among the plans to participate in international projects and to organize at least one intercultural event per year in the period of 2021-2025.

In the ERASMUS program where parallel with the student mobility there was also an intensive teacher mobility until the present virus crisis. Although these connections are operating quite well, it is recommended to maintain and manage these contracts permanently with these universities from abroad, even during the COVID period and permanently increase the number of students and staff members taking part in mobility activities in the future.

There is a Career Counselling and Information Center at UCB as well. The services of the center help students to find their place in the labor market. Career Counselling and Information Center has offices in the three centers where the University's faculties operate, in Pitești, Râmnicu Vâlcea and Brăila.

The university develops scholarship programs for students with good performance in the university activity, but there are also social scholarships for students who have a difficult financial situation or who are orphans. Moreover, in order to stimulate competition and performance, according to the self-evaluation report, the university offers tuition-free places in the pre-admission competitions, for each of the study programs. In recent years, the university has awarded about 250 merit scholarships (places without tuition fee).

Constantin Brâncoveanu University transparently provides information and data, quantitative and/or qualitative, current, and correct about qualifications, study programs, diplomas, teaching staff, facilities offered to students or any other details of interest to the interested public. The public information also can be found on the UCB 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 becomes priority in the future. The university also uses social media to reach present and potential students as well.

Material resources

The three centers of the university are operating in the cities of Brăila, Pitești and Râmnicu Vâlcea. The university pays attention to invest permanently in infrastructure and facilities when own resources, and any other funds allow.

According to the written documents, the headquarters of the university in the three municipalities in which it operates, each comprising 2 buildings, total approximately 17,500 sqm of developed area. The buildings have classrooms with 150-500 seats, amphitheatres, and other teaching rooms with capacities of 75-200 seats, 38 seminar rooms, 14 laboratories and specialized offices, three libraries with 6 reading rooms, with a total of over 200 places, book deposits, documentation rooms for teachers, offices for management and functional structures.

The material base of the institution seems to be 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.

Financial activity

As a non-profit institution, UCB is a self-financing university, establishing funds from the annual school tuition taxes, donations and sponsorships, research contracts, or other interests. It is important to point out that without state support UCB 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 might 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.

During the present virus crisis, the expenses have become certainly lower although the maintenance of the built infrastructure results a permanent fixed cost.

Research activities

The importance of research activities seems to be significant in the university. In case of the universities of Central-Eastern Europe, the European resources become more and more important in financing research activities.

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. UCB 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. 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 UCB it seems that there is an intention to manage the partnerships and develop connections to raise the level of international visibility and collaboration. Regarding to this process, 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 region.

Additionally, UCB 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.

The international connections of the university 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.

There are six scientific research centers within the University: the Center for Economic Research – Pitești, the Center for Legal and Administrative Research – Pitești, the Center for Economic and Social Research – Brăila, the Center for Research in Tourism

and Sustainable Development – Râmnicu Vâlcea, and the Center for Student Research. Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești has also obtained positive results in terms of scientific research on a contract basis, signed with various institutions and economic actor from Pitești, Brăila and Râmnicu-Vâlcea or by participating in externally funded programs.

“Management Strategies” journal, the first issue of which appeared in 2008, publishes studies, reviews and applied research in direct correlation with the realities of the current economic, national, and international environment. Currently, “Management Strategies” journal is indexed in three international databases: RePEc, DOAJ and Ideas. Starting with 2016, Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești also publishes a second journal, with national and international profile, namely Revista Economia Contemporană [Contemporary Economic Journal], which is also indexed in seven international databases (EconPapers / RePEc, IDEAS, BASE, SCIOPI, OAJI, ResearchBib, Index Copernicus).

The university also has a publishing house Editura Independența Economică [Independence Economic Publishing House].

Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești annually organizes symposia and other national and international scientific events (International Conference “Knowledge Economy-Challenges of the 21st Century,” - eighth edition; International Scientific Conference “Accounting and Finance – Universal Business Languages, scientific event now in its sixth edition).

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.

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deadline and responsible. Both the Strategic Plan and the Operational Plan have components that directly target the quality assurance policy.

Constantin Brâncoveanu University operates Commissions for quality assessment and assurance have been set up within faculties and departments, coordinated by deans, respectively department directors and which are composed of quality managers/internal auditors and student representatives. The quality commissions at the faculty level prepare annual quality reports and collaborate with the Quality Evaluation and Assurance Commission of the university.

The quality assurance system adopted by Constantin Brancoveanu University ensuring a better correlation of the educational and scientific research services offered by the university with the requirements of partners and other stakeholders, it generates a permanent improvement of the quality of the educational and scientific research services offered by Constantin Brancoveanu University and developing a culture of quality within the institution. The quality assurance system is also ensuring a real protection of the interests of partners, students, and other stakeholders by the services offered by the university and defining and implementing a system of internal evaluation of the quality of teaching and scientific research processes, of external evaluation, in order to certify the compliance of these processes with the applicable national, European and international standards.

The main document of the Quality Management System is "Policy and objectives of Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești in the field of quality management", which is aligned with the strategic objectives contained in the Management Program for 2021-2025 of the rector of the institution, which through the approval of the university senate, became the Strategy of Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești.

Conclusion

My report is based on what I have experienced; what I have read and have heard before and during my visit. I recommend the level of confidence rate for the university with emphasizing the following:

- UCB 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, changing educational conditions in the online world during the COVID period, etc.);
- UCB 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;
- UCB 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;
- It could be also a possibility to develop foreign language educational programs as it seems that the present human resources allow this development path;
- If the present pandemic situation drags on for longer time, Constantin Brâncoveanu University of Pitești, just like other higher education institutions, has to pay intensive attention for taking the possible advantages of it and might keep some parts of the online methods when the virus crisis is going to be over.

Finally, I would like to thank to the Rector of the institution and all the university staff for the help they have given during the online evaluation. 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.

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