

‘Gheorghe Asachi’ Technical University of Iași
External Institutional Evaluation Report
October 2021

Introduction

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for institutional evaluation of ‘Gheorghe Asachi’ Technical University of Iasi (TUIASI). Prior to the site visit, I studied the English version of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) of TUIASI. During the visit, which was carried out online due to the pandemic restrictions on 18 to 22 October 2021, I had a good opportunity to enhance the information I had received about TUIASI and its operation.

The site visit started with preliminary online meeting of experts as members of the evaluation team. At this meeting, preparation and harmonization of evaluation stages in the blended format was discussed. Then, online meetings with representatives of different positions within TUIASI and beyond took place. During the above-mentioned period, I had a chance to meet the vice-rectors of TUIASI, Prof. Irina Lungu and Prof. Maria Carmen Loghin, and the president of the Senate, Prof. Iulian Aurelian Ciocoiu. I also had a series of individual interviews with other representatives of many positions/roles across the structure of TUIASI such as Prof. Dorina Niolina Isopescu, dean, Dr. Ionut Ovidiu Toma, head of department, and Prof. Carmen Teodosiu, a representative of the teaching staff. I also talked to Dr. Tudor Stanciu, head of the student counselling centre, Ioan Ursache, a Student League representative, and one of the international students, Mbanefo Nnoli (Nigeria). During the whole period of evaluation, I participated in several plenary/group meetings with representatives of TUIASI’s teaching staff, students, alumni and employers of TUIASI graduates.

During the site visit, I received additional documents related to some aspects of the operation of TUIASI upon my request, which helped me to complete the picture. Thanks to this, I had a chance to study materials related to leadership, management and governance, budgeting, study provision including student counselling, research, internationalization, external relations, quality assurance and many other aspects of the operation of TUIASI for the purpose of this evaluation.

I benefited from a highly collegial approach of the whole team of evaluators led by Prof. Ion Popa, head of the mission, and Prof. Rosca Calin, coordinator of the expert evaluators’ team. Also, I would like to express my gratefulness to ing. Stefania Armaselu, an ARACIS officer, for her very helpful support throughout the evaluation process. Finally, I would like to thank sincerely to Ms Daniela Gavrilescu and Ms Evagrina Dirtu for their support throughout the whole visit. It was all very helpful.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned, I herewith submit my report on TUIASI’s institutional performance as I have perceived it. I am well aware of the fact that this is a limited view by an external evaluator and a much deeper insight is needed to really capture 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 TUIASI and ARACIS with opinions aiming to contribute to possible improvements at

TUIASI and quality assurance of higher education in Romania.

Mission statement

TUIASI is a public higher education institution, and it is well-established in the context of Romanian higher education, playing an important role in the field of technical higher education.

Its mission is to “to carry out specific activities to create, exploit and transfer knowledge to society in fundamental areas – Technical Sciences, Architecture and Urbanism – as well as in interdisciplinary and complementary fields, involving the local community as well as the regional, national and international levels” (TUIASI website). The mission statement of TUIASI is formulated clearly; it is adequately elaborated, ambitious and generally acceptable. The mission of TUIASI emphasises a three-fold focus: “assuming the role of education, scientific research and cultural institution”, which needs to be appreciated.

The mission statement of TUIASI seems to be in positive relation with its strategic objectives.

The main instruments to achieve the mission are identified as interlinks between teaching and research, academic freedom and adequate conditions for students and the staff, openness to external environment including international settings, and collaborative partnership with subjects of external environment.

I find these intentions complementary; they seem to constitute a solid basis for the construction and development of TUIASI’s activities.

Academic freedom and academic integrity

The academic deontology and ethics code are included in the TUIASI Charter “and the observance of its provision is mandatory for all persons belonging to the academic community” (SAR, pp. 33-34). Academic freedom has been pointed out as one of the key principles of TUIASI operation (see section on the mission). The importance of the environment of ethics and academic integrity was emphasised by TUIASI representatives during the interviews, too.

The Academic Ethics and Professional Deontology Committee (CEDPU) was established at TUIASI, consisting of academic and administrative staff and student representatives. The university provides the legal framework for the work of CEDPU; all its decisions are endorsed by the legal advisor of TUIASI. Members of the CEDPU change every four years based on elections. The agenda of the CEDPU deals mostly with issues of plagiarism, ethics and discipline.

In the 2018/2019 academic year, when ARACIS standards were implemented in the curricula, ethics and integrity classes started at TUIASI. The university organised “Academic Quality, Ethics and Integrity”, a postgraduate course set up within a project financed from institutional development funds with the objective to train prospective teachers of academic ethics and integrity classes.

The bodies of TUIASI seem to be established and operating in accordance with legislation and providing the faculties with adequate academic freedom.

TUIASI also pays attention to public liability and responsibility and relevant bodies and procedures in this context.

Most of the documents related to questions of academic freedom and integrity are available in Romanian only.

Recommendation:

- *Consider publishing key documents related to the operation of the university in English*

Organisation and management

TUIASI is a well-established institution of higher education sector in Romania. It consists of 11 faculties to which a teacher training department is attached. Twenty-four research/excellence centres are accredited at TUIASI, and various research teams operate at the level of faculties and laboratories.

The fundamental regulations for the operation of TUIASI are published in its Procedure Manual of the institution (available in Romanian).

It appears that the management and administration of TUIASI are well developed vertically, horizontally and in other directions across the university. There are three basic levels within the structure of governance and management: University (Senate, Administration Council), Faculties (Faculty Council), and Departments (Department Councils). Some other bodies such as the Council for Doctoral Studies are in place as well.

The procedures of election for key positions are well developed and used adequately at TUIASI, ensuring student representation.

TUIASI has a strategic plan and yearly operational plans focused on all main areas of institutional operation: education, research, involvement in social economic and cultural activities, internationalisation, investment policy, computerisation, digital communication, and image of the university.

The rector's team consists of six vice-rectors whose agenda seems to cover all the main areas of TUIASI's activities. The offices of deans and university administration services correspond with the strategic management structures of TUIASI.

Academic programmes and student management

TUIASI currently offers a relatively wide range of study programmes at all three levels. Specific criteria and standards apply for each level. According to the SAR, the total number of students is almost 14 thousand. Some programmes are provided in English.

TUIASI endeavours to develop some programmes in co-operation with foreign higher education institutions and other relevant bodies such as the Romanian Alliance of Technical Universities and the Group of National Institutes of Applied Sciences (INSA) in France.

The academic programmes seem to be in compliance with TUIASI's mission statement as well as with international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum may be viewed as appropriate for the academic degrees awarded. The programmes seem to be well thought over and regularly monitored, evaluated and updated when necessary.

The admission procedures are clear, in line with legislation and publicly available. The admission of foreign students is regulated specifically. TUIASI applies its own methodology for the admission process which is made public well before the application period.

As for the rules and regulations related to study and assessment of student results, they seem to be clear and publicly accessible throughout all stages of the study.

TUIASI declares that student-centred approach is the key didactic principle in the programmes concerned. This encourages students to develop theoretical knowledge as well as practical skills. Attention is paid to internships in the programmes offered during studies at TUIASI. These are largely based on cooperation agreements with the industry. TUIASI makes overall efforts to consult the study programmes and their development with the employers. This involves consultations about the curricula including definition of themes of diploma theses in some cases. The above-mentioned information was confirmed as examples of good practice by many representatives of employers during the interviews.

Opportunities for students' research activities seem to be anticipated at all levels.

Attention is paid to development of transversal and soft skills at TUIASI, which needs to be appreciated as well. Examples of corresponding activities are mentioned by the SAR and were confirmed during the interviews.

Generally, students have a chance to make use of mobility exchange programmes in the course of their studies. However, the interviews and documentation available indicate that mobilities should be made a more prominent part of the study experience, particularly on upper levels of studies.

Student support is realised in varied ways at TUIASI; efforts are made to decrease the drop-out rate. As for the strategies applied, consultations with the teaching staff, advisors and tutors and personalised supervision seem to play the lead. The university has implemented a number of projects in this context. Career counselling is in place (via services of the Counselling Centre, staffed by only two persons, both with background in education and psychology).

Students' organisations are involved in the development of support activities for learning and social life at TUIASI. Some attention is aimed to assist new students from abroad (system of buddies as local students helping international students to integrate, for instance).

It seems that ties with alumni are not very strong and there is a potential for development in this respect at TUIASI.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities to strengthen the importance of international experience for students (longer study stays), particularly PhD students in their programmes*
- *Consider possibilities to support staffing of the Counselling Centre*
- *Consider possibilities to work more closely with the alumni*

Research

The TUIASI considers research as one of strong pillars of its operation. The focus on research is confirmed by the mission and strategic documents of the institution, action-related plans and their orientation as well as by research results. There is focus on both fundamental and applied research. As it appears, the quality of research performance varies across the institution with some very good results and some in need of improvement in quality.

The main research-related structure is represented by the research centres (24) and teams operating in these.

There is a tendency to open postdoc positions for PhD programme graduates at TUIASI, which is not a typical practice of development and making use of postdoc schemes elsewhere.

The strategy of research and annual plans are analysed and validated by the Senate. Annual research plans include research themes by area of study, topics and projects, resources allocated according to targeted objectives, deadlines, and result indicators. Also, TUIASI has mechanisms and structures for evaluation of quality in research (annual evaluation reports and/or self-evaluation of research activities, departmental scientific committees for result analysis, reviewer committees, etc.).

As indicated in the SAR, the university benefits from external research funding in a significant extent (p. 56). This seems to be based on good co-operation with various partners in industries. At the same time, more research funding from national and international granting schemes seems to be desirable at TUIASI.

According to information received from the interviews, internal research grants are available to junior researchers (5 to 10 thousand EUR). Besides, there is evidence of support for student research by TUIASI (student research conferences).

The Research Support Centre was established at TUIASI short ago, aiming to help academics to design research project proposals. This will hopefully increase competitiveness in research funding nationally and internationally.

The TUIASI strives to be involved more actively in the life of the research community in Romania and beyond. Academic events are organized regularly (scientific meetings, symposia, conferences, round tables, exhibitions) and research results are published.

The institution has been gradually improving its research infrastructure by means of larger projects and in other ways. In this context, some businesses seem to act as very helpful partners who can update some of the infrastructure and provide support for students, mainly doctoral.

Research is explicitly part of the agenda of one of the vice-rectors and, at each faculty, the agenda of one of the vice-deans, including student integration in research.

Ethical considerations related to research are taken into account at TUIASI; the Academic Ethics and Professional Deontology Committee has been established for this purpose.

The issue of transfer of research into broader society is addressed at TUIASI as well (Technological Transfer Office supports this). Improvement of the flow in this direction by spin-offs and support start-ups is part of the package.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities of training students' supervisors (supervising their theses and dissertations) in supervisory skills*
- *Consider possibilities to open up postdoc positions for young international scholars*
- *Consider possibilities of attracting more international researchers into postdoc positions at TUIASI*

Staff

There is a large number of highly qualified members of TUIASI's academic staff.

Efficient, equitable and transparent mechanisms seem to apply for academic staffing at the university. All teaching positions are appointed by competition meeting legal provisions. A large majority of these positions are occupied by tenure staff whose professional qualifications correspond with existing requirements. Other positions are occupied by adjunct teaching staff.

Regular evaluations/assessments are a common part of working with the staff. Various forms of evaluation are used. Promotion policies include analysis of the performance of the staff in teaching, research and services for the university and the community. The three-fold nature of the mission of the university is projected in particular academic levels.

Activities for professional development take place at TUIASI with varied focus and forms. Academic staff members are trained in several basic domains such as teacher training and research including production of written research proposals. The ambition is "strengthening the relationship between education and research" (SAR, p. 68). A good example of recent activities provided for the staff is summer trainings focusing on on-line teaching. Administrative staff members are probably trained via courses in different areas as well.

During the interviews, students and alumni were positive about the academic staff and the administrative support.

Recommendation:

- *Consider possibilities of providing management training to leaders at different levels of the structure of TUIASI (e.g. departments)*

Internationalisation

Learning/teaching and research are profiled as activities reflecting and including international dimension at TUIASI. There is a tendency to foster this profile and the international dimension of key activities.

TUIASI has a considerable number of bilateral cooperation contracts with universities in Europe and beyond as well as a high number of partners in industries. Mobility and other academic exchange activities are evident at TUIASI; so is the emphasis on this aspect in some strategic documents and recent actions. This mainly relates to teaching and research. The number of outgoing students/staff has not been very high so far, especially those who can benefit from relevant, longer study/research stays; and the number of incoming students is very low. Not so many visiting academics come to TUIASI, it appears.

The number of study programmes in English is relatively small. Some examples of efforts to integrate Romanian and non-Romanian students within TUIASI can be found (cultural events, buddies, and so on).

According to information received from the interviews, TUIASI has recently started to participate more actively in international educational fairs. The institution is also a part of an international consortium of HEIs, which could improve some aspects of internationalization including research.

There is a very small number of full-time international staff at TUIASI.

The English version of TUIASI's webpage is not very informative.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities to increase the number of study programmes in English*
- *Consider more possibilities to support integration of Romanian and foreign students at TUIASI in order to employ the potential of a culturally rich student body and avoid what is usually called "a myth of internationalization at HEIs"¹*
- *Consider possibilities to make the English version of TUIASI webpage more informative*

Finance and infrastructure/Space and equipment

TUIASI is financed from several resources: the state budget, resources generated by student tuition, rental income from lease, donations, sponsorships, collaboration agreements and other resources. The institution has an annual budget in line with the financial policy of TUIASI and current legislation.

The TUIASI seems to have sufficient financial resources for its operation so that the strategic objectives and continuity of the mission targeted are arranged for. According to the SAR (p. 43), the university was allocated the sum of 238,317,884 lei by the Institution Contract in 2020, of which payments were mainly made to cover personnel expenses, goods and services, student transportation and scholarships expenses.

¹ Knight, J. (2011). Five Myths about Internationalization. *International Higher Education*, (62). <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2011.62.8532>

The budgeting seems to be largely centralised and the measures adopted seem to ensure that all units operate with reasonable financial backing. This puts a lot of responsibility and pressure on the decision-making bodies at the central level and high demands on communication between/across different levels and positions within TUIASI.

TUIASI students can receive scholarships and other forms of financial aid in order to participate in extracurricular activities such as research projects, scientific events, competitions, publication of papers and so on. Scholarships are granted from public allocations and/or internal resources.

TUIASI seems to have sufficient and solidly equipped rooms for learning, research and other activities (lecture halls, teaching and research laboratories, seminar rooms, library rooms etc.) usable in accordance with effective technical, safety and health/hygiene regulations. According to the interviews, the level of equipment is not always up-to-date, varying across the institution and its units.

The campus of the University ('Tudor Vladimirescu') is a large complex on an area of about 14ha with facilities for accommodation and social life of about 7,500 students. Thermal rehabilitation of several buildings was done as part of numerous investments in recent years at TUIASI.

The library of TUIASI provides a collection of 840,320 books and access to relevant scientific electronic resources supporting the process of teaching and research (appropriate with subjects provided by the curricula of higher studies). The library maintains publication exchange and collaboration with 39 partners in the country (in 21 cities) and 188 abroad (33 countries). Also, the library provides access to the InfoStandard database of full-text Romanian standards and to SINTACT, a legislation database. The project 'ANELIS PLUS 2020: electronic national access to scientific literature for support of research and education system in Romania' makes it possible for the library to provide TUIASI staff and students access to relevant e-databases and platforms. Seven branch libraries are equipped with reading rooms and borrowing halls.

TUIASI runs its own publishing house (Politehniun Publishing) which supports the process of education and research by a large variety of relevant materials.

As for digitalisation, the IT and Digital Communications Office administrates the IT infrastructure and accounts on Google, Microsoft, Cisco Webex and the moodle platform (<https://edu.tuiasi.ro>). As it appears, the university runs multiple IT systems in administration, finances/accounting, scientific research, teaching and research monitoring, but these are not sufficiently integrated in one IT system.

Due to the pandemic restrictions, I could not visit the above-mentioned premises and facilities in person, therefore my findings are based on documents and other information provided by TUIASI and received from the interviews.

Recommendations:

- *Keep considering how to create easily accessible and solid study conditions for SEN students wherever possible*
- *Make sure that the multiple IT systems in use are adequately integrated*

Quality management

The TUIASI seems to pay adequate attention to quality assurance of the main processes. The structure and process of quality assurance are well developed.

Data for quality assurance and evaluation are collected, processed, and analysed regularly at various levels of the institution. Both internal and external evaluation are cyclically conducted for this purpose at TUIASI, comprising different levels/actors within the institution. Student evaluation is a part of this.

In this context, the Committee for Quality Assurance and Evaluation (CEAC) coordinates the enforcement of procedures and activities of quality assurance and evaluation, The Committee produces the Annual Report on quality which is approved by the Senate. Proposals for possible quality improvement in different aspects of operation are specified in the action plan. Some other bodies entrusted with quality assurance have been established across TUIASI and their interrelation seems to be well elaborated.

It may be concluded that quality management is adequately organized, containing a series of processes and focused on relevant areas of evaluation and opportunities for improvement.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities to inform students about what happens with their feedback*
- *Consider how teachers can respond to individual student feedback in an individualized way (electronically)*

Final recommendation

I recommend providing TUIASI with institutional accreditation with the rating of High Confidence.

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