



## Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ARACIS

International Evaluator's Report

University of Balti „ALECU RUSSO”

June 2023

### Introduction

I was invited to join the evaluation group for the institutional assessment of Alecu Russo Balti State University (USARB) by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). Prior to the site visit, I reviewed the USARB's Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and a few other documents. During the visit, which was held on-site from June 14th to 16th, 2023, I had a great opportunity to expand on the information I had acquired regarding the USARB and the way it operates.

The site visit began with a preliminary meeting of experts who serve on the evaluation team. The preparation and harmonisation of evaluation stages were discussed at this meeting. The meeting was followed by a conversation with the USARB's top officials. Throughout the evaluation process, I had the opportunity to attend all plenary/group discussions with representatives of the USARB teaching staff, students, alumni, and employers of USARB graduates. During the visit, there were also individual meetings and group discussions with individuals from various positions inside the USARB and beyond. Separately, I met with USARB executive management members in charge of research, foreign relations, quality assurance, and other key personnel.

During the site visit, I obtained extra documents related to several areas of the USARB's work at my request, which assisted me in completing the image. As a result of this, I was able to examine materials on leadership, management and governance, research, internationalisation, external relations, quality assurance, and many other facets of the USARB's functioning for the purposes of evaluation. Because the visit was organised on-site, I had a great opportunity to see the USARB's key buildings and a variety of facilities.

I'd like to thank Mr. Sorin ALECSA, an ARACIS official, for his invaluable assistance during the evaluation process. I also profited from the highly collegial approach of the entire group of evaluators, led by Prof. Gabriela PRELIPCEAN, the mission's leader, and Prof. Vasilica STAN, the expert evaluators' team coordinator.

I am submitting my report on the USARB's institutional performance as viewed by me, based on the sources of information listed above. I am conscious that this is a limited perspective from an external evaluator and that a much deeper understanding would be required to truly capture the spirit of some of the concerns reviewed. My review, as well as my recommendations for possible consideration, should be interpreted as a collaborative effort to present ideas to the USARB and ARACIS in order to contribute to prospective improvements at the USARB and the quality assurance of higher education in Moldova.

### General Statements

USARB is a public educational institution that is part of the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova. It was founded in 1945. It was reorganised multiple times since then, with the most recent reconfiguration occurring in 1992, when the institution was renamed Alecu Russo Balti State University.

The Alecu Russo State University of Balti accepts its mission as: education and advanced scientific research to meet societal needs, and as a catalyst for the development of the Republic of Moldovan society by: implementing lifelong learning and academic mobility; increasing the quality and efficiency of education and learning processes; promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and stimulating creativity and innovation, as well as entrepreneurship.

The vision of USARB is to be a national leader in higher education, fundamental and applied scientific research, and openness to European recognition for all university study programmes by developing an organisational culture centred on quality, collaboration, creativity, excellence, and the active participation of all university community members.

### *Comments/Recommendations:*

- The Institutional Strategic Development Plans represent the USARB strategic priorities. The strategic objectives are reinforced and outlined in each faculty's and department's Strategic Development Plans.
- The USARB's Strategic Plan for the period 2021-2023 addresses all major areas of the

institution's operations and is organised as follows: Objectives - Achievement level and priority actions - Performance indicators - Persons in charge. The USARB's mission, vision, and strategy are all interconnected.

- The USARB's significance for the region of Northern Moldova and beyond is obvious: being the region's only high educational institution, it is vital to the city's and region's development. It's not surprise that employers, as well as students and graduates, are quite pleased. This university is a driving force for regional being. This function should be underlined further in the implementation of USARB's strategic objectives in education and research.

### Managerial Structure

The USARB has a variety of regulation documents that govern the institution's organisation and management processes. The University Charter is the most important document in this regard.

USARB is a multi-unit institution. It currently has four faculties organised into departments, one chair (who is not associated with any faculty and reports directly to the Rector), a doctoral school, and four inter-institutional scientific research centres. The University additionally includes the Ion Creangă Pedagogical College and the Nortek Innovation and Technological Transfer Centre. USARB enrolled 3511 students in the most recent academic year (2022-2023).

The functioning regulations of the University's structural subdivisions are prepared in compliance with the applicable legislation.

While the rector/deans/heads of departments represent the institution's executive processes, the university senate and The Institutional Strategic Development Council (CDSI) form the institution's self-governing bodies. However, the senate also includes some delegates from executive bodies (for example, a dean). Although the legislation allows for this, the question of whether this is a functional model remains.

The SAR describes the principles of the USARB's organisation and operation, and they provide as a suitable foundation for the primary areas of institutional activity. The electoral regulations stipulate a transparent procedure for electing the institution's leaders.

The USARB operates on a three-year strategy, and as previously mentioned, its current strategic plan (2021-2023) appears to be a solid basis for its institutional development.

### **Comments/Recommendations:**

- *The USARB has a very active leadership. The administration has a vision for the university's future, as well as fresh ideas and a strong commitment to regional development.*
- *Consider the potential of a senate devoid of academics who also serve in executive capacities on the USARB's faculties.*
- *Consider the prospect of having a sufficient number of students represented in the USARB's consultative, decision-making, and executive structures.*
- *In the Charter, the Rector and the Senate should be on the same level, which would also correlate to the European trend of powerful rectors running universities.*

## Teaching Staff

The USARB has qualified staff to deliver the present portfolio of educational programmes as well as other relevant activities.

According to the SAR, 214 teaching staff members work at USARB during the 2022-2023 academic year, with 158 employed full-time (7 professors, 69 associate professors, 25 university lecturers, 57 university assistants), and 56 hired through external cumulation. During the interviews, it was revealed that there are some staff development activities, primarily linked to the development of teaching skills, including online teaching.

Periodic evaluations are an essential aspect of working with employees. This covers a range of evaluation methodologies, which may serve as a foundation for future developments.

The student-to-teacher ratio in each institution is one teacher for every sixteen students.

Students and alumni were generally pleased with the academic staff and the administration's assistance.

## Facilities

During the visit, I was able to see almost all university buildings: central buildings, faculty buildings, the library, certain laboratories, dormitories, and the student canteen.

In terms of infrastructure, the USARB has its own premises for teaching, research, and outreach to the public. It also has a Pedagogical College and a Nortek Innovation and Technological Transfer Centre, which ensures that the educational process, scientific research, and the economic environment are all linked. There are also dining rooms, a library with a large selection of related databases, and other amenities.

Students in various disciplines can also use a variety of specialised platforms and apps for student learning and research.

### *Comments/Recommendations:*

- The existing facilities could accommodate many more students and personnel than are now available.

## Students

The USARB Student Representative Structure was established in 2012, and in 2017 it was renamed the USARB Student Self-Government, with the goal of promoting and capitalising on students' capacities in various fields, through support, implementation of ideas, and encouragement of their participation in extracurricular activities.

The USARB has implemented a number of study programmes at various levels in a variety of subject fields. It offers undergraduate studies in 11 fields: 37 programmes (14 of which are part-time); 32 full-time master's degree programmes; 5 doctoral programmes; and courses for continuous professional development. The programme information is made public, and the USARB either organises or participates in special events to publicise its offering. USARB

has a human potential, as well as the technical and material resources, to provide quality education in all study programmes included in the educational offer. The enrollment capacity of the USARB exceeds the number of currently enrolled pupils, students, and trainees. The rules related to the assessment of student results throughout all study phases are clear, The sections of Service for Students, Career Guidance, and Professional Insertion appear to be a significant framework. During the site visit interviews, students primarily expressed gratitude for the university's assistance. The USARB is concerned with graduates' employability in the work market. During the talks, employer representatives expressed enthusiasm for USARB grads.

### Research

The mission statement of the USARB declares research as one of the two pillars (together with education) of the institution's existence.

The USARB's strategic objectives emphasise research development, and the university appears to organise a number of scientific sessions, symposia, and conferences with national and international involvement each year.

To encourage research activity, USARB grants creative leaves to teaching and research staff, organises an annual competition of scientific and scientific-methodical works, and supports the publication of scientific and didactic works. USARB has developed a Code of Ethics to safeguard ethics and integrity in research activity and to prevent intellectual or academic fraud.

The university possesses significant scientific and inventive potential.

Since 2010, the USARB Senate has approved a wide range of awards, the Senate awards, for important results in the field of scientific research at the end of each year.

The papers and other research findings appear to be valued both domestically and internationally. Some employer representatives informed us on the status of research collaboration with the USARB.

#### *Comments/Recommendations:*

- *Increase the number of research projects with national and international funding.*
- Encourage collaborations with other research institutes that make use of USARB's excellent research facilities.
- *Stimulate academic entrepreneurship of staff, graduates, and students.*

### Internationalization

The USARB internationalisation strategy for 2018-2023 was designed with the assistance of the ELEVATE project, which facilitated the establishment of a policy/normative framework with internal applicability to ensure the internationalisation of education and research in the USARB.

The USARB claims to have signed over 30 inter-university agreements.

Students (and professors) can take advantage of a variety of foreign mobility options, mostly through the Erasmus+ programmes.

The number of new teaching and administrative employees at EU universities is not as large as the number of outgoing ones, which could be viewed as one of the opportunities for further development. The SAR has no information about incoming students.

One of the vice-rectors is responsible for the international agenda.

#### ***Comments/Recommendations:***

- *Consider increasing the amount of incoming mobility students (and personnel) from other HE schools in Moldova and elsewhere.*
- *Consider the possibility of encouraging more PhD students for outcoming mobility (research and study stays).*
- Continue intentions to be internationally more visible and better known.
- Strengthen the institution's foreign language policy by offering English language courses in all Faculties.

#### **Quality Management**

USARB's institutional emphasis is on the development and implementation of quality assurance procedures and policies.

The USARB places a high value on quality assurance (QA) of the main processes. Overall, the quality assurance structure and processes are built on a solid foundation. In this regard, the most recent Quality Assurance Strategy for the period 2022-2024 has been developed.

The Quality Management Department (QMD) appears to be the primary authority in this subject; it has been in operation since 2011. It is primarily concerned with QA policies, methods, and procedures, programme evaluation methodologies, student evaluation, assuring the quality of teaching staff performance, evaluating the learning process, and so on.

At the university level, the USARB has created a QMS Manual.

All programme students are asked to offer comments on the educational activity and its primary characteristics. It is unclear how students are kept up to date on the status of their input. It is also unclear whether and how teaching staff whose work is evaluated by students are given the opportunity to reply to student feedback, explain the rationale for their work/approach, and so on.

It appears that the research performance of some personnel should be given greater attention during the review process, and additional efforts should be implemented.

The prime vice-rector for didactic activity is in charge of the entire quality assurance agenda.



***Comments/Recommendations:***

- *Make sure students are kept up to date on the status of their feedback on teaching activities.*
- *Ensure that didactic personnel whose activities are evaluated by students have an opportunity to respond to students' input.*

**Conclusions:**

Government and regulatory agencies appear to be overregulating the university. Universities will not become innovative and sensitive to change until they are given actual autonomy and accountability. Governments should oversee the university sector as a whole through a framework of general standards, policy objectives, financial methods, and incentives for education, research, and innovation activities. To face the current and future challenges of higher education in our global society, organisational structure and decision-making procedures should be streamlined, and bureaucracy eliminated to the greatest extent possible.

The USARB, on the other hand, has a very active leadership. The administration has a vision for the university's future, as well as fresh ideas and a strong commitment to regional development.

I am confident that USARB will continue to make a positive contribution to Moldavian society through education, research, and its extensive social involvement.

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**Date:** 03.07.2023