University of Bucharest

EVALUATION REPORT

December 2012

Team:

Henrik Toft Jensen, Chair
Sijbolt J. Noorda
Philippe Rousseau
Rui César C. F. de Carvalho
Liudvika Leisyte, Team Coordinator

Contents

1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the University of Bucharest. The evaluation visits took place from 24 to 26 June 2012 and from 19 to 21 November 2012.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase

- A European and international perspective

- A peer-review approach

- A support to improvement

The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses upon:

- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management

- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a 'fitness for (and of) purpose' approach:

- What is the institution trying to do?

- How is the institution trying to do it?

- How does it know it works?

- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 University of Bucharest and the national context

The University of Bucharest is one of the largest and oldest universities in Romania. It was established in 1864 by the Decree of Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza with the faculties of Law, Science and Letters. In 2011/2012 the University had 34,459 students studying in a variety of disciplines in 19 faculties, 1 300 academic staff, and 1 100 administrative staff. In terms of research activities, the University of Bucharest has around 50 research institutes, departments and centres and 5 research platforms. Currently, the Institute for Advanced Studies is being set up (SER, 2012).

1.3 The Self-Evaluation Process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by the University of Bucharest self-evaluation team, chaired by Prof. M. Platis. The team consisted of:

- Magdalena Platis – Vice-Rector
- Ioan Pânzaru – Former Rector 2005 – 2011 (Faculty of Letters)
- Marieta Costache – Department Director (Faculty of Biology)
- Cristian Panaiotu – Associate Professor (Faculty of Physics)
- Corina Grigoriu – PhD student (Faculty of Philosophy)
- Daniela Zaharia – Lecturer (Faculty of History)
- Raluca Moise – Head of Public Relations Department
- Sorin Costreie – Head of Quality Management Department (Faculty of Philosophy)

The Self-evaluation Report (SER) is a comprehensive, informative, and open document and was submitted to the self-evaluation team on time. Additional data and materials were provided to the team upon request before the main visit. The self-evaluation report was prepared based on discussions of the self-evaluation team with different faculties and university management.

The members of the University of Bucharest, who were interviewed, were aware of the self-evaluation process that was taking place at their university. As the team learned before the second visit, the SWOT analysis was being carried out in all faculties and the results were to be posted on the university website.

1.4 The evaluation team

The self-evaluation report of the University of Bucharest, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team (hereafter the team) in May 2012. During the visits, the team visited the Faculties of Biology, Psychology and Educational Sciences, Letters, Political Science, Geography, Mathematics and Informatics, Physics, Business and Administration.

The team consisted of:

- Henrik Toft Jensen, Roskilde University, Denmark, Chair

- Sijbolt J. Noorda, Association of Universities, the Netherlands

- Philippe Rousseau, University Lille III, France

- Rui César C. F. de Carvalho, University of Coimbra, Portugal, Student Representative

- Liudvika Leisyte, University of Twente, the Netherlands, Team Coordinator

The IEP team is most grateful for the hospitality shown by the University of Bucharest, the excellent organisation of the two visits, timely and extensive reporting as well as the open and frank atmosphere which the Rector and the Chair of the self-evaluation team created. The IEP team appreciates the great interest and collaboration shown by the Rector, Vice-Rectors, the deans, the self-evaluation team, university academic and administrative staff, and students. The team wishes to extend special thanks to Rector Prof. Mircea Dumitru, Vice-Rector Prof. Magdalena Platis and Bogdana Dumitrascu and Mihaela Cucu from the UEFISCDI.

2. Governance and decision-making

The University of Bucharest (BU) University has a clear statement of its mission as seen in the SER 2012. Its mission is to "provide students with training at a European level in the fields of sciences, natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, to produce new ideas and to review the current state of knowledge in these fields" (SER, 2012). The strategic goals for teaching are geared towards contribution to the European Higher Education Area through compatibility of study programmes, diplomas, curriculum, comparable ECTS, student-centred learning and European mobility. The university prioritises its research in "the interdisciplinary strategic direction for environmental research, advanced materials and cognitive sciences" (SER, 2012). The University of Bucharest aims to strengthen the position it has in the national and European contexts as a university focused on students and as an excellent university for teaching and learning.

The cornerstones of BU's mission are teaching and teaching quality, European level research and the provision of important services to society. The BU puts forward two key goals: to strengthen its integration into the European Higher Education Area and to increase the national and international visibility of the institution. The team positively evaluates these strategic goals. However, they are rather general and need to be specified and operationalised. The operationalisation provided in the BU's Operational Plan 2012 provides a long list of objectives. However, concentration on the most important objectives is paramount. The team believes that the objectives need to be precise and operational to be useful for the BU. The interviews revealed that, at present, BU puts forward six main objectives: 1. Rethink the balance between central and faculty levels; 2. Make the decision-making process more efficient and transparent; 3. Deliver services to society; 4. Improve research performance; 5. Internationalise; 6. Promote social inclusion.

The SER and other documents provided as well as the interviews carried out with the members of the BU community have revealed that governance structures and decision-making processes are not always clear, optimal, efficient and transparent. In some cases, the same or similar administrative tasks are carried out in a variety of departments at various levels resulting in inefficiencies and confusion for the users of their services.

Our respondents from the BU have reiterated the constraints they experience due to bureaucracy, which often is attributed to the numerous, rigid and yet constantly changing regulations from the government. In their view the rigid rules are a waste of time and constrain the research and teaching missions of the Bucharest University. They are consuming valuable resources both from the administration and the academic staff. Some examples of such consequences are: delayed implementation of projects; not being able to hire academic

and administrative staff despite the high number of students and research projects; rigid budgeting and public procurement procedures. The results were a waste of funding possibilities, initiative, and academic's and administrative staff's time.

The team is aware of the constraints imposed upon the university by its legal and economic environments. However, following the 2011 Law on Education which devolved some governance and human resources arrangements to universities, BU needs to take the opportunity to address the internal governance and decision-making within its own organisation.

The team has witnessed a strong awareness of the necessity to rethink the balance of responsibility between the central and faculty levels. The university aims to make its administration more efficient and transparent. It is important to draw up an overview of the structure of the administration and its administrative processes. University governance structures and processes should be reviewed to see whether they are functional, and should be adjusted accordingly. This will allow the issue of duplication of services and inefficiencies to be solved.

The university should have a more coherent administrative structure serving the university community in a simple and one-stop manner. We invite the BU to seek efficiencies as much as possible within the remit of the contextual constraints. For example, maintaining one central statistical database for all institutional information, including teaching, research, services, students and staff, and providing necessary analysis upon request to inform its own decision-making processes is a precondition for well-informed and timely decision-making. Having institutional statistical data gathered and kept in different departments and research units is not helpful for ensuring quality management processes or helping decision-making at the University of Bucharest.

The team agrees that there should be a good distribution of academic responsibility and decision-making between the Rectorate and the faculties on the one hand, while it should be investigated if some additional practical services should be provided by the central level, on the other hand. We saw an example of this with the research office where one office is located centrally at the university and aims to assist academics with various grants. Research grant management is an important part of the academic work portfolio, but it is difficult to have just one central office without administrative staff in the faculties who can help academics to submit and administer external grants. It is important to note that "governance" as well as "management" should serve and support the academic community at the University of Bucharest.

3. Teaching and learning

The University of Bucharest has an extensive programme offer with 100 programmes at Bachelor level, and 180 at Master level. At the doctoral level the university specialises in 18 research domains and in 22 at postdoctoral level (University Information Leaflet).

The institutional priorities regarding teaching focus on learning outcomes in the curriculum and the training are increasing the administrative staff and teachers' professionalism and increasing the international visibility of study programmes. The university has prepared the guidelines for teachers on student-centred learning (SER, 2012).

The team saw a great deal of efforts to secure and develop quality teaching at the University of Bucharest. Students and staff who were interviewed confirmed what the team read in the institutional documents — commitment to a student-centred approach and use of a variety of teaching methods to ensure the high standards of student learning. The main concern expressed by the academic staff was the volume of the teaching workloads, which leave little room for research activity. The lack of academic staff is strongly felt at university, especially in faculties with high student numbers and high student-teacher ratios.

The team saw a strong effort in making sure that most of the teaching is evaluated. The academic staff appointments and yearly reviews are carried out where teaching is one of the evaluated activities besides science and professional activities. As seen from the self-evaluation form that academic staff are asked to fill in — the formulation of learning outcomes in course descriptions, description of teaching strategies, self-assessment of course evaluation practices and course improvements are among the most important elements in teaching evaluation. Other important aspects taken into account regarding the evaluation of academic staff are staff communication with and guidance of students, interpersonal and group communication, and provision of tutorials. Besides the faculty level, academic staff evaluations, the Department for Quality Management at the central university level evaluates overall education processes.

There is a clear effort at BU to enhance teaching quality and help teachers who need it. Junior teachers are supervised by more experienced academic staff. Professors attend the classes of junior professors as was mentioned, for example, in the Faculty of Physics.

The team has seen the use of quality assurance tools, such as student evaluation questionnaires and discussions of student evaluation results partly at the faculties and partly at the university level. Interviewed students filled in course evaluation questionnaires and some examples of improved course methods or curriculum changes were provided by the students. Students give feedback to teachers directly, or file complaints via the faculty boards.

Students in the Faculty of Physics, for instance, mentioned that a teacher could be replaced if performance is very poor.

Furthermore, students and teachers noted that communication between students and teachers takes place continuously via e-mail. Students can approach teachers for meetings and discussions. As seen, for example, in the discussions with students and staff in the Faculty of Political Science and the Faculty of Business and Administration, teachers are quite accessible: they ask for feedback during lectures, and students can meet teachers even though teachers do not have offices. Short lines of communication between teachers and students were also reported in most of other visited faculties, such as the Faculty of Physics, Biology, Geography, Education and Psychology.

4.   Research

According to the BU's internal regulation, the research strategy at the university is drawn up annually by the BU's Scientific Board. It is based on the integration of the yearly programmes of the university's research centres. The strategy has to be approved by the University Senate (Art. 7, BU Research Regulation).

Research at BU takes place in various units within the departments and faculties (Art. 4). Researchers are affiliated to both a research centre and a faculty. According to the SER (2012), research is coordinated by a variety of structural arrangements, such as Institutes (e.g. Institute of Genetics, Institute of Classical Studies), laboratories, research centres, project units and consultancy centres. The team observed that in some faculties, research centres create good conditions for research while in others, research centres do not seem to be functioning. This structure for research encompassing different entities may be too complicated to operate effectively. Therefore, the relationship between different research entities should be clarified to ensure reasonable responsibility.

Research management at BU is centralised. It is welcome to see that the administrative, and especially financial management of the research projects, is carried out centrally at the university level by the Office of Research and Technology Transfer. At the same time, the team has witnessed concerns from interviewed academics that project management procedures are cumbersome and they can sometimes jeopardise the success of research projects. The lines of communication and responsibilities are unclear, thus, a great deal of time is needed for an academic running a research project.

During the team's visits we saw vibrant research activities in some faculties. The doctoral and postdoctoral researchers the team met at various faculties were engaged in externally-funded research projects, both nationally and internationally. Academic staff attend international conferences and organise various local scholarly events. At the same time, research activities in other faculties were not equally impressive. Publishing in foreign language journals is not easy. For quite a few interviewed academics publishing internationally is a new type of activity, the rules of which they need to learn, in addition to all their other responsibilities: teaching, research, and service. Since the assessment of research has started recently, academics feel an impetus to get involved in research projects and belong to research centres. But the limited resources at the national level, payment disruptions linked to the EU Structural Funds' schemes, restrictions to hire new staff as well as having no or very limited capital investments in infrastructure for the past few years have limited the research performance at the University of Bucharest.

Given these limitations the university should try to overcome these and create more ambitions and possibilities for research, especially in faculties that so far have been less active.

Research opportunity is unevenly distributed across the university — in some disciplines more possibilities were observed than in others. If the University of Bucharest wants to offer research-based education, it has to improve research in all fields, especially in the newer faculties. There should be an effort to create and increase research capacity in all faculties. Some faculties need support in this regard.

Although some examples of European-funded research projects can be found at the university, it is important to make better use of available funding from outside the university and the Ministry. It is vital for the University of Bucharest to enhance the research development of young academic staff. We saw promising junior academics overloaded with teaching responsibilities at the time when they should be given more room for research and publishing. An initiative of creating an Institute of Advanced Studies at BU, which provides fellowships to support postdoctoral researchers and assistant professors/lecturers, is an excellent idea in this context. At the same time it is important to stress that the young researchers should be in close contact with their department and faculty. In addition, a redistribution of teaching loads across the different levels could be helpful. Perhaps more senior academics could increase their teaching loads to support upcoming talent. In several European countries, such as Denmark and Germany, junior academics have lower teaching loads than senior academics.

## 5.	Services to society

The team realised that BU highly prioritises delivering services to society. This is an important duty of a university next to teaching and research. The team observed BU's vision is translated into strategic priorities and action plans. Overall, services to society, such as collaboration with other institutions in the city, with the city, the Parliament and NGOs are regarded as important. Services to society take a variety of forms and the team observed that initiatives were taken regarding delivery of services related to both teaching and research.

The team observed some innovations in the teaching programmes to adapt to societal needs. This has been the case, for example, in the Faculty of Physics as well as in the Faculty of Business and Administration. The team saw the link to employers through practitioners' involvement in teaching, student traineeships, and contribution of employers to study programme development. The meeting with employers revealed the satisfaction of employers with the BU graduates and they expressed their willingness to contribute more to the study programmes and the development of the university. This was especially true of alumni who wanted to contribute to their *alma mater*. On the other hand, some criticisms were expressed about the very theoretically-oriented knowledge provided by the university and the relatively low level of soft skills of the university graduates. This concern can be addressed by putting further emphasis on problem-based learning and on student placements in business, public administration and public service as they widen the opportunities for graduate employability.

But it should always be remembered that practical knowledge should not be the only factor in making decisions regarding academic education.

The team congratulates BU for its awareness of the importance of service to society.

The team has seen university research contributing to the surrounding community as observed in the Faculty of Education and Psychology, for instance. Further, the Open Mind International School of Advanced Studies in Cognitive Science offered by the BU is open to the broader public and it can serve as another positive example.

The team observed the effort to secure social inclusion at the University of Bucharest. The university works with the schools in Bucharest through information campaigns and counselling.

Social inclusion is an important and ambitious goal, which requires the university to be ready to accommodate the diversity of students. The university needs to be prepared to deliver special services especially for the first year students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The

team suggests offering summer courses preparing the students before they start their first year of undergraduate studies.

Finally, it is important to combine service activities with research and to reveal research strengths in the context of scarce resources by combining research strengths, such as joining forces in the higher education and research landscape of Romania. For example, joint programming and colocation as witnessed by the case of the Physics Faculty and the surrounding research institutes can be a useful way forward for the University of Bucharest in ensuring the engagement with the community and collaboration with research partners.

6. Quality Culture

The team has seen a great deal of efforts to promote quality culture at the University of Bucharest. The quality improvement oriented practices, such as course evaluations via student questionnaires, continuous exchange between lecturers and students and possibilities for students to give feedback informally to teachers were the examples mentioned during the interviews. Some examples of how feedback fed into the improvement of teaching methods and course content were provided as well. The qualifications of academic staff, the strict criteria for hiring and promotion, the demands for continuous staff appraisal showed that quality of academic staff is taken very seriously at BU. For example, the team noted the rigour with which the Senate Advisory Commission for Teaching monitors the procedures of hiring academic staff. If this monitoring is done without unnecessary bureaucracy then the team is impressed with this. Finally, the team met and discussed the work of the Department for Quality Management, which reports to the Vice-Rector for Quality Management and Relations with Business Environment. The Committee of Quality Assurance and Evaluation reports to the Rector (SER).

The BU started developing its internal quality assurance system in 2004 and the policy has focused on introducing quality management approach, developing strong institutional quality culture approach and enhancing the employability of its graduates.

The team further observed that ranking has a high priority at BU. It has been mentioned a couple of times in the BU self-evaluation report as well as during the interviews with the university management and the quality assurance department. We observed the publication of the information booklet about rankings for the university community. The team understands that this emphasis on rankings is partly due to the pressure from the Romanian Government. The team acknowledges that ambition is important. To that end, benchmarking at European and international levels is more important.

The team strongly recommends the university to continue putting efforts in creating a quality culture and attributing a minor role to rankings. The usual international rankings are not development-oriented and too rough a measurement to be of direct use to the University of Bucharest. Institutional evaluations can be development-oriented if the university uses the momentum it provides in order to reflect on current practices and put quality improvement as the centre of the university's efforts. The development of a quality culture at the university is a necessary condition to achieve the university's strategic goals. This is the way forward.

7.   Internationalisation

The team has seen from the self-evaluation report, the documentation provided and the interviews with staff and students that internationalisation is a high priority for the university. The university is a member of the European University Association (EUA), the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA), and the Black Sea Universities Network (BSUN). The range of international agreements is wide with a total of 130 bilateral university agreements to date. The university participates in international collaborative research projects. The international student and staff exchanges are increasing. Participation in European exchange programmes has been growing. Some study programmes at Bucharest University are offered in foreign languages, especially at Master's level.

Although incoming and outgoing international mobility has grown in recent years, it is still marginal in many faculties. The same holds for the study programmes offered in foreign languages. The team has seen examples of good practice in some faculties, like the Faculty of Political Science, where we saw that some study programmes are offered in French, English and Romanian. Further, we observed that the university is an active member of AUF in supporting education in the French language. Annually around 200 scholarships are offered to students. Furthermore, cooperation with the French Cultural Service and the French Embassy is long-standing and influential. For example, the French Institute Foundation recently awarded a prize — the *Grand Prix Culturel* 2012 to BU. The BU has been awarded this prize of 750 000 euros to establish the regional Francophone Centre of Advanced Studies and Societal Studies in Bucharest. The award will be used to renovate a historic villa in Bucharest where the new centre will be established.

To broaden internationalisation at BU, reach its strategic objectives and harness its strategic position it is essential that much richer, multi-lingual programmes are being offered at BU and the number of programmes taught in foreign languages are increased (e.g. good example of this in the Political Science Faculty and in the Faculty of Geography). Furthermore, efficiency of partnerships is needed to increase international visibility — less is more.

The team has noted from the interviews and documentation provided that administrative staff responsible for internationalisation are dispersed in different offices, sometimes divided by the type of programme funding, sometimes by the type of mobility. The team finds it highly peculiar that the internationalisation support function is in the hands of different offices and officers, such as the International Office, the Office of Community Programmes, and an Officer for Mobility within the Department for Research. These central offices could be organised in another way, with one office taking care of the different aspects of internationalisation. In addition, each faculty should still have a person responsible for

international mobility. This complexity at the central level is confusing students and staff who would like to be mobile as revealed by the interviews. It is also not helpful for foreigners who would like to come to BU. At the same time there is no doubt that the involvement of the faculties in the administration and development of internationalisation activities is important to make sure that there is awareness and ownership of internationalisation at the level where it should function: a central office should support the decentralised efforts.

Last but not least, quite a few concerns were expressed about the facilities for students, especially for foreign students. The lack of dormitories was one of the main complains the team heard from students. Dormitory spaces seem to be limited and are, as the team was informed, reserved for the incoming foreign students on exchange programmes. Students who are self-financing and coming from abroad also need dormitories. In addition, problems with the Romanian language and difficulties to integrate were also mentioned as obstacles for foreign students. The team highlights that it is also important to have sufficient student dormitories—student facilities and social activities for foreign students. This will definitely increase the attractiveness of the university as a destination for foreign students.

8. Conclusions

BU has a great reputation in the country, among students as well as in the academic community. UB should be allowed the means and freedom to further improve its performance and continue to serve society and contribute to scientific advance.

BU should be doing whatever it can to do things better (in terms of teaching, learning and research, and of leadership and administration) and make sure that it is doing the right things.

The team was impressed by the university's performance in education, regularly innovating study programmes and clearly committed to student success. Because international rankings do not reflect educational performance universities like BU are structurally underrated.

In terms of research BU has quite a road ahead. Some disciplines have more opportunities than others, but in general the conditions are too limited. Given the present budgetary climate this can only be remediated by success in (inter)national competition.

It is, therefore, very important to stimulate outstanding young researchers by research grants and international experience and find ways to invest in up-to-date research facilities and "practice".

During the site visits and whilst reading the documents, the team got increasingly worried about the bureaucratic impact the legal context has on BU. This is an issue that BU cannot alter by itself. But what can be done should be done.

In addition to this in-house activity the Romanian Government should allow institutions in the country more freedom to operate and develop.

Summary of the recommendations

The IEP team, considering all the points above, provides the following recommendations to the University of Bucharest to advance its goals:

1. Decentralised academic decision-making in education and research (fitting the university strategy, quality assurance and budgets) should go hand in hand with centralised efficient services in every area (fitting the decentralised needs and purposes).

2. Rethink the balance between quality assurance promotion and ranking ambitions. Broaden the quality assurance of education to learning outcomes and quality culture. Ensure that QA procedures are effectively functioning throughout the whole organisation.

3.   Separate more clearly the strategic and the operational functions and responsibilities in the running of the university.

4.   Unify all the centralised support services and build an efficient, simple and transparent administrative apparatus led by a highly professional head of university operations reporting to the Rector and his team.

5.   Implement a unified data information system as well as a central university statistical database.

6.   Seek strategic cooperation in the Bucharest area and in the country among the leading academic institutions to strengthen the national influence and increase international visibility.

7.   Design long-term planning to stimulate valorisation of education and research.

8.   Actively promote academic cooperation and communication between different faculties. The Senate should be playing a role in this instead of focusing on legal matters.

9.   The University should enhance the role of the Senate in safeguarding academic standards and evaluating new ideas.

10.   Stimulate and allow students to take a lot more minors outside their faculty study programmes.

11.   The team supports the idea of increasing internationalisation at the University of Bucharest and recommends increasing the number of programmes taught in foreign languages.

12.   Rethink the structure of the administration of internationalisation.

13.   Encourage qualified scientific staff to work in teams and research centres to enhance productivity and visibility.

14.   The team recommends the university to plea for research funds from the government.

15.   The team recommends the university to stress that fast-changing regulations of universities create a lot of work and instability.

9.   References

Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport (2012) Background Paper: Overview of the Romanian Higher Education System. Bucharest: Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport.

Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport (2011) Law of National Education. Bucharest: Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport.

University of Bucharest (2012) The Self-Evaluation Report. Bucharest.

University of Bucharest Institutional Documents: Senate committee mandates, University operational plan 2012, University strategic plan 2012-2016, regulations regarding organisation, development and financing of research activities, organisational charts, statistics provided in the SER Appendices.