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## Institutional Evaluation Programme

*Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities*

### DANUBIUS UNIVERSITY OF GALAȚI

#### EVALUATION REPORT

*August 2014*

Team:

Maria Helena Vaz de Carvalho Nazaré, Chair

Hans Beunderman

Ivan Leban

Nicolai Slotte

Jacqueline Smith, Team Coordinator

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## 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of *Universitatea Danubius Galați*, from here on *Danubius*. The evaluation took place in 2014 in the framework of the project “Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities”, which aims at strengthening core elements of Romanian universities, such as their autonomy and administrative competences, by improving their quality assurance and management proficiency.

The evaluations are taking place within the context of major reforms in the Romanian higher education system, and specifically in accordance with the provisions of the 2011 Law on Education and the various related normative acts.

While the institutional evaluations are taking place in the context of an overall reform, each university is assessed by an independent IEP team, using the IEP methodology described below.

### 1.1 The 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 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:



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- 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. Danubius's profile

Galați is a city in the eastern region of Romania, near the border with Moldavia. Galați is an industrial town, with a declining population, and a fairly high and rising unemployment rate. The city is situated on the Danube and its vicinity to the Danube Delta, a tourist attraction known for its natural beauty, could be further exploited with regard to the diversification of the university's educational offer.

Danubius, a private, non-profit higher education institution, founded in 1992, is comprised of three faculties: Law; Economics; Communications and International Relations. It is equipped with good facilities and an informative website, currently being redesigned and expanded. As the leadership explained, private institutions were not well accepted in the early 1990s, but the founder's good contacts with the authorities gave Danubius credibility and legitimacy during that time. Currently, Danubius is funded almost entirely from tuition.

Like all HEIs in Romania, Danubius has been affected by major events or trends in the last two decades: frequent changes in the higher education law – the most recent 2011 law having been amended already several times; joining and implementing the Bologna Process, which meant modifying the approach to higher education; a worldwide economic crisis to which Romania responded with drastic austerity measures; joining the European Union, thus having to comply with new regulation, some of which was defined outside the country; a worrisome demographic decline aggravated by emigration. As a result, institutions face a blurred horizon and have difficulty in making plans for the future.

Danubius is a private institution but subject to most of the same rules as public HEIs regarding what they can teach, the governance structure, and the number of students they can enrol. They must comply with the requirements of the same law, with, according to the interviewees, a few exceptions which grant private institutions slightly more autonomy than public ones: e.g. the freedom to hire more staff while a freeze on hiring was imposed on public HEIs.

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance-ARACIS evaluation in 2009 and 2011 resulted in a "limited trust" rating, because Danubius had not implemented all the recommendations previously made by ARACIS, as stated in the relevant report. This was a disappointment for the university, but:

1. The leadership analysed the situation and corrective measures were taken, enhanced through a shift towards cooperative rather than competitive attitude; ARACIS performed an



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entirely new evaluation which yielded a “trust” rating, communicated just before the IEP team’s second visit.

2. Although pleased to have improved the rating, the leadership also stated that the rating did not affect potential enrolment, as students select the institution based on its reputation and employment success of alumni.

Danubius has been greatly affected by demographic decline: in a span of three years (from 2011-2012 to 2013-2014) enrolment fell from 4 491 to 2 570, nearly 43% drop. Several factors have combined in causing this major decline: the overall demographic downturn in Romania, the decreasing success rate among high school graduates at the final exams which results in fewer potential applicants to higher education, the difficult economic situation which leads families to postpone or even give up higher education. Danubius must devise compensatory measures. As several interviewees explained, a number of avenues are being explored or launched, such as: turning towards international recruitment, offering new attractive courses and programmes, always focusing on quality first. These measures will be further examined in sections below. Most interviewees consider that the worst of the decline is over now but the team finds this view rather optimistic.

Danubius considers that their main competitors are the universities that offer the same programmes, and those that offer state scholarships. In this region their only competitors are public HEIs, namely in Galați and Constanța. Danubius’ “defense strategy” is to find a niche, for example, to offer unique programmes, such as the Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) or a degree in international shipping. In addition, the staff considers the faculty of law, the faculty of communication and international relations and the faculty of economics to be their strong points in their region, between Bucharest and Iași, but all recognise that competition is growing, thus they aim to go global and collaborate with other national and foreign institutions.

Some advantages, according to them, include the institution’s small size, the fact that it is private, its geographic location at the border of two large countries, its rather young academic staff, and the fact that they are engaged in a continuous process of adapting. There appears to be a strong Danubius organisational culture. Therefore they express confidence in the future in spite of legal and economic uncertainty.

On its website, Danubius expresses its vision as “The assertion that the University is among the first of the Romanian and European universities in terms of quality modern education” and states that “The University blends harmoniously and balanced the teaching and learning with the scientific research and it is involved in the global society projects through the services brought to the local, national and European community.” To reach this goal, the values and strategic objectives are also listed on the website, and translated into operational plans that will be further examined below.

### 1.3. The evaluation process



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The self-evaluation process was undertaken by an ad hoc group of 10 persons representing different sectors of the university. By coincidence, all members of the self-evaluation group were women.

Each structure of the university provided input in the process, although some members believed that more could have been done. The group met and analysed the documents; the information was disseminated within the university; the final report was submitted to the rector and was translated into an action plan. The group benefitted from their experience with the ARACIS evaluation, which familiarised them with ARACIS and European expectations for evaluation. In fact several of the annexes sent to the team had been initially prepared for an ARACIS evaluation. For the SWOT analysis, each constituency (teachers, students, support services) prepared its own SWOT; each point was discussed in the self-evaluation group then integrated in the final SWOT; the SWOT points to strengths and opportunities, but according to some participants it was not quite complete as more weaknesses should have been mentioned. The Senate was informed about the SER.

The members of the self-evaluation group found the IEP approach to evaluations and the structure provided in the guidelines useful as it helped them to focus on certain topics. After the first visit, each department held meetings where everyone had a chance to express their opinion. The staff appreciated being able to discuss “real” issues with the team whose questions helped them understand better how the university functions.

The self-evaluation report of Danubius, together with the 38 appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in mid-January. The two visits of the evaluation team to Danubius took place from 17 to 19 February and from 14 to 16 April, respectively. In between the visits Danubius provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:

- Maria Helena Vaz de Carvalho Nazaré, former Rector, University of Aveiro, Portugal, team chair
- Hans Beunderman, former Vice-Rector, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands
- Ivan Leban, former Vice-Rector, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
- Nicolai Slotte, student, Lund University, Sweden
- Jacqueline Smith, former analyst, OECD, France, team coordinator

The team thanks the Rector, Prof. Andy Pușca, his colleagues and students for their hospitality and their willingness to contribute to the discussions and to share their experience. Special thanks go to the liaison persons, Gabriela Marchis and Vasilica Negrut, who have been very helpful in meeting the team’s requests.



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## 2. Governance and institutional decision-making

The strategic plan describes the vision as follows:

Danubius University will be recognised in the national, European and international academic field, as a prestigious higher education institution, an excellence centre in the fundamental fields of education and research, as well as a stimulating environment for studying, research and the constant interchanging of cultural and scientific values.

How the university proposes to materialise this vision is what the IEP evaluation aims to identify.

The institution's governance structure corresponds to the recent law: decision-making with the Senate, executive functions with the Administrative Council. The composition of both Senate and Administrative Council also follows the law; the rector is not a Senate member but is invited to attend the Senate meetings.

Interviewees explained that under the 2011 law, the university community votes to choose how the rector will be selected: either the academic community votes to elect the rector, or the rector is selected and named by the Senate. At Danubius, the choice was for the community to vote to elect the rector. The rector appoints vice-rectors, deans and heads of departments, who are all selected through a competitive process.

The team was told that a private university must be established and supported by a foundation which guarantees that students enrolled can complete their cycle of education should the institution need to end its activities. The Danubius university charter, which is approved by the Ministry of Education, gives the founder the right to dissolve the university; otherwise the position is mostly honorary.

According to the charter, the Senate holds the decision-making power; however, it meets only every three months, while the rector is present and active all the time. Therefore, it appears that the rector holds the real power. In fact, not only does the rector concentrate power via various formal positions — for example, covering the two essential positions currently vacant, those of vice-rector for education and dean of the Faculty of Economics — but also a number of tasks, at the risk of exhaustion potential conflicts of interest.

As the team understood from discussions, the relations between foundation-Senate-rector are as follows: the rector signs a contract with the Senate and with the founder. The Senate has the decision-making power, but the rector is responsible for the institution. This separation of power and responsibility could be a source of difficulty, even potential paralysis, in the case of conflict between Senate president and rector, which the leadership acknowledges. However, in case of conflict, the Senate can revoke the rector, and the founder can revoke the Senate. In this particular situation the founder and rector are of the same family, the rector is a member of the foundation which may lead to further imbalance



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and limitation for the Senate to fulfil its role: the leadership structure could be locked. This would ask for clear transparency in all decision-making processes. At the moment the governance seems to be collegial and smooth between the Senate, the rector and the founder.

In fact, within the formal structure informal contacts seem to prevail throughout, helped by the institution's small size; all signs that the team perceived are of a productive collaboration between the faculties.

The leadership summarises Danubius' mission as "promoting knowledge and innovation". Indeed they see some of their initiatives, whether recent or not, as innovative in that region: e.g. they see Danubius as the university of the second chance for specific student-target groups, which is confirmed by some of the more mature students who returned to study after working for several years.

Some of the staff members agree that Danubius should collaborate with other institutions in the region; they are considering partnerships but prefer those outside rather than inside Romania, apparently for fear of the problems of power sharing.

Staff and leadership try to be flexible, in order to adapt to socio-economic changes. Several activities have been created or launched recently, in the past two or three years, such as the lifelong learning centre, DIBS-Danubius International Business School, extension of international activities, DiSEDD- Socio-Economic Dynamics in Sustainable Development (research centre on sustainable development), Eurolim 4 (research centre on Danube environment). All these activities are seen as relevant to higher education and the economy of the region, but given the reduced capacities the team notes it may be difficult to carry them all out successfully and advises that priorities are set in order to ensure an efficient distribution of resources.

The leadership envisions that if the number of students is insufficient in the future, the institution would turn to servicing knowledge for a wider range of client groups. A number of activities are already going in that direction (see DIBS, below); Danubius is undergoing a shift of mission, from purely education and research to more knowledge service.

## 2.1 Finance issues

The budget is a key issue in the functioning of an institution. In the yearly budget cycle, each department prepares a proposal; proposals are centralised and consolidated, then transferred to the administrative council that submits it to the Senate for final decision. Depending on revenues, the Senate may decide on budget cuts; these will affect salaries, which represent up to 70% of the budget.

The aim, of course, is financial sustainability. Eighty-nine per cent of funding comes from tuition, 10% from research funding, and 1% from other sources. The tuition fee is calculated according to an algorithm referring to cost per programme and in comparison with state funding per student. The team was told that the tuition fees are comparable with those for





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paying students at state funded institutions, in spite of a recent 12% increase to partially compensate for declining enrolment numbers and for the rising cost per student in the last two or three years. However, it was not made clear to the team up until what level increasing the tuition fees is sustainable and what contingency plans have been devised.

The budget is established based on a formula, and essentially takes into consideration previous costs, but also the declining enrolment numbers. Yet it does not seem that the budget is calculated proactively, nor that it includes overheads; e.g. other than the fact that it will be shown in the next year's budget, the team could not obtain information regarding the cost of the new programme launched in 2013, nor the revenues it is expected to generate. It appears to the team that there is little room for prospective policy-based budget planning.

The Senate decides on the total allotment for salaries. Then, up until now, each academic staff member negotiates with the help of the person selected as staff representative. The individual salaries are confidential, but salary scales are public and can be accessed by anyone. The baseline for salaries is the same as in public institutions and is defined by law.

As in all institutions, the most important budget item is that of salaries. Yet, the team could not get a clear picture of the criteria used to determine salaries, bonuses and promotions. This suggests that the process is not fully transparent. There is a need to stimulate certain areas, and to cut in others; tensions ensue and if the process is not completely transparent trouble may arise. Considering the difficult financial situation and the uncertainty about future developments, the only way that necessary steps can be accepted by the staff is via a completely transparent process; this is stated in Danubius' code of ethics "transparency requires access to information, both in terms of admission, evaluation, hiring and promoting, and concerning sources of funding or research and the criteria by which the university institutional decisions are made".

Detailed job descriptions, with qualification requirements and criteria for promotions are being prepared, due to be submitted to the Senate in May 2014, and will be included in employment contracts. Then, depending on financial resources the Senate will decide on the bonus level. Up until now bonuses were decided based on individual evaluations, thus could be arbitrary the team feels; but from now on the process will be mission driven.

Budget allocation between faculties is based on student numbers, which are the main criterion in the budget negotiations. The most recent annual report (2012-2013, p. 57) states that "the accounting office helps to promote transparency within Danubius university by achieving the first performing budget of the university... which provides a detailed analysis of costs and revenues"; these details refer essentially to student numbers.

Most investments regarding infrastructure were made a few years ago when student numbers, and therefore income, were higher.

Danubius applied for and obtained European structural funds; however, the latter were frozen, creating a cash flow problem for which the university had to borrow. Funds have been



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released now but the university recognises that it must expand and diversify its funding sources.

Between the two visits, Danubius learned that they had earned six POSDRU<sup>1</sup> projects on tourism and environment. The project's budget of around two million euros is a welcome relief in the current situation. This also shows that the institution can and does take advantage of opportunities offered to HEIs.

## 2.2. Human Resources

Along with student numbers, staff numbers have declined in the last three years, although in lesser proportion: from 100 academics to 81 and, at the time of this evaluation, two essential positions, for which the rector is currently acting in interim, were vacant (see p.8). The academic staff is relatively young (50% are below the age of 45) and 56% of them female.

By necessity, most staff members hold several functions in the institution, technical responsibilities as well as academic support and teaching. As a result, many staff members feel overburdened. A recent decrease in the budget also led to staff cuts, this especially seemed to be the case for support staff. And yet the academics and support staff whom the team met exhibited strong commitment to their field, their students, and the institution.

All teaching staff are involved in research. Most are involved in a mobility programme of short duration, maximum three months, thus it is not difficult to fill in for them while they are away.

As told to the team, there is a scale set by law for the baseline salary that applies to public and private institutions, but private institutions are allowed to grant slightly higher salaries than the public ones. Danubius can give a small bonus for achievement or additional payment for additional work. When taking up a position at Danubius, a new staff member has to understand that, as a private institution, it depends on tuition income, and therefore salaries can increase or decrease. At the beginning of the academic year, the staff was convened as a group to be informed of the situation. For example, in 2013/2014, there was a slight decrease. However, while the salary fluctuations can be understood, it should be considered that further cuts may affect staff satisfaction and the quality of performance.

Staff evaluations are performed regularly; if the evaluation includes negative points, the head of department will discuss it with the teacher. As part of staff development, English language classes are offered, in order to improve the staff's language skills, an essential dimension for Danubius to establish an international reputation. Another dynamic approach is that of training which was offered in 2013 for participants to learn to adapt to change.

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<sup>1</sup> Project financed by the European Social Fund under the program "Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013. In Romanian: "Programul Operational Sectorial Dezvoltarea Resurselor Umane – POSDRU" <http://www.pia.rwth-aachen.de/posdru.php?lang=en>, accessed 28/04/2014.



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There is no staff union and the administrative staff is not represented in the Senate. Some staff members play the role of mediator, if necessary, but the function of ombudsman does not exist. However, a structure to deal with complaints is in place.

Individual teachers may be involved in consultancy work outside the university on their own time; the income from these activities is exclusively their own; e.g. several professors are working as lawyers. DIBS is part of Danubius and when it starts generating income this will be shared between the university and the school.

### 2.3 Recommendations

From what the team observed, and learned through the meetings and the documents provided, the governance structure follows the legal regulations and, at the same time, tries to expand activities beyond the basic requirements. This dynamic pro-active approach is essential for survival. Taking the current constraint into account, the team offers the following recommendations

- Given the uncertainties regarding the future, it is highly recommended to develop contingency plans for various scenarios.
- In view of the many projects undertaken and the concomitant means reduction, it is necessary to prioritise the objectives and to define a realistic implementation plan.
- While it can be appreciated that all functions are carried out, the rector should not have to assume so many, he should delegate some responsibilities and some tasks.
- Invest in human capital, academic and support staff, who represent the key asset of the university; Danubius needs a policy to attract and retain good staff.
- Efficient institution's management requires that key vacancies should be filled as a matter of urgency.
- Encourage discussion of assessment criteria for academic and support staff, thus increasing understanding and acceptance of the process on the part of those concerned.
- Pay attention to the risk of further salary cuts and absence of clear reward scheme which may cause demotivation among staff.
- Take into consideration that the campus culture may be affected by increased diversity in student population (employees, mature "second chance" students, distance learners, foreign students).
- Create the position of a neutral ombudsman.
- The prevalence of tuition fees as main source of funding can become a threat to the institution's financial stability in the context of declining demographics and shrinking of the student pool. The university recognizes the need to expand and diversify its funding sources, which the team urges it to pursue.



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- The elaboration of the budget should include risk evaluation.



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### 3. Teaching and Learning

The mechanics of the Bologna Process are now integrated; the SER describes the various implementation steps. Several dimensions form part of the education at Danubius, such as learning outcomes, mobility, lifelong learning. The self-evaluation report refers to the Bergen Communiqué, but not to more recent communiqués where useful lines of development can be found.

Students apply to Danubius because of the available facilities and the atmosphere: they reported that the staff is approachable and that it is easy to obtain information or support. For several of them, it also means that they can stay close to home. It was surprising that among the students met during the first visit, few were interested, for example, in doing an Erasmus mobility programme. Several reasons were mentioned: fear of the unknown, fear of the cost, lack of self-confidence, “home body” mentality as they admit themselves. Others, however, have greatly benefitted from mobility programmes, and wish that there were more on offer.

Some are “mature” students already engaged in a profession. Teachers consider that it is a privilege to enrol this type of students who bring a different perspective to the university community.

According to students, learning outcomes are explained at the beginning of a course, the information is available online, these goals are the basis of exams as well as of continuous assessment. For students, attendance to seminars is compulsory, but not attendance to lectures.

Interviews with academics and with students all indicate open, interactive relations. Some teachers see themselves essentially as “trainers”. This corresponds to the “Student - centred learning in higher education, characterised by innovative methods of teaching that involve students as active participants in their own learning... flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning” that the most recent Bologna Bucharest Communiqué recommends. Students state that they have good contacts with teachers and that an open door policy prevails. This may be related to the fact that all the community members are trained to cope with change. The team noted a positive atmosphere between staff and students.

The dropout rate has been hovering around 20% during the last two years. The 2013/2014 dropout rate was not known yet at the time of this evaluation but the team notes a series of factors that may lead to a certain improvement in future years. As the end-of-secondary-school exam became stricter, there are chances that students entering higher education are academically better prepared, thus less at risk of failing. To this external corrective factor the university adds an internal factor when the dropout is a consequence of a difficult economic situation; in that case the university helps by stretching payments.



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The university tries to adapt to students' needs with a wide spectrum of educational offers: new courses, new programmes, some courses taught in English, an EMBA, online coaching, distance education. However, interviewees claim that this is a poor economic region, with declining demography, therefore it is difficult to develop locally, which is why they aim to develop on an international level and attract foreign students. Therefore, Danubius is launching courses in English, which may interest Romanian students as well, and marketing efforts are directed at neighbouring countries, in particular Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Turkey and Ukraine. This will be done through a commendable initiative to send 26 staff members abroad to explain Danubius' activities to potential partners. The staff considers that a unique marketing point is the rich history of Romania.

The team was told that the following steps are undertaken to set up a new study programme: 1) A study to examine what future opportunities the job market in this field will offer to graduates; 2) Identifying the appropriate staff and checking that it is financially feasible; 3) Meeting all the bureaucratic requirements. Depending on courses that may remain untaught, the department council may assign additional teaching hours to certain academics who then receive increased salaries.

Since its early years, Danubius has engaged in teaching contracts with companies as an additional education option. The demand has to come from the companies themselves, which was more frequent when the economy was doing better.

Distance learning has been offered for almost 10 years now; all its programmes are accredited, and all academics are involved and took part in a training course. Part-time learning is also offered. All these courses must be part of one of the existing departments; in other words Danubius could not offer a distance or part-time programme if this programme does not already exist for full-time education in the institution. Both types of education lead to the same degrees as the full-time presence education. Continuous education provides requalification for working persons. For part-time students, modules are available on a well-integrated online platform.

In the Faculty of Communications and International Relations, a centre for marketing coordination brings together students and professors to devise a university marketing strategy along with the leadership. All involved appreciate this approach of teachers and students working together on a project.

Stakeholders take an active part in the life of the university, even concerning teaching; they express that leadership and staff are open-minded and open to change. Some of them are consulted each year on specific subjects. They collaborate by indicating the number and type of positions that are available and could be filled by Danubius graduates. Another example is that of professional association of lawyers which has an agreement with Danubius to create a "territorial institute": good cooperation with Danubius is established starting from the first year all the way to the final bar examination. This group of lawyers is constantly in contact with Danubius students; they also offer law internships. Another stakeholder explained to the



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university what he expected from students, and the institution made some changes to meet these expectations.

Stakeholders agree that Danubius' best option in the current difficult economic situation is to adapt quickly. They suggest developing transversal personal skills: communication, self-assurance, leadership, or new fields relevant for the region such as tourism industry. In that sense they echo an observation made by the ministers in the Bucharest Communiqué that "Today's graduates need to combine transversal, multidisciplinary and innovation skills and competences with up-to-date subject-specific knowledge so as to be able to contribute to the wider needs of society and the labour market".

In relation to the decreasing number of students, some interviewees stated that many students are already working full time but they enrolled at the university as a job requirement to have a diploma in their field. These students' main motivation is to obtain the diploma. Over time those who still require a diploma are fewer.

A student association has been established with the help of the law faculty. While the current student members may be active and dedicated, the association membership is limited. The whole institution would benefit from greater participation in the student association.

The students whom the team met are satisfied with what they are offered at Danubius; the only improvements they wish for are more video classes to serve the many distant learners, a digital library that can be accessed from outside the institution and dormitories for students from other cities.

An alumni association meets on the university premises with the students. Danubius maintains a database to follow up on the graduates who provide information on their work experience and may suggest changes to the curriculum. Students who returned to university after working for several years stated that Danubius' overall situation has improved.

## Recommendations

In teaching and learning, the team found many positive aspects, reflected in the mutual appreciation between staff and students.

- The first and main recommendation is to continue doing what is well done, for example maintaining a positive atmosphere, trying to diversify educational offers in order to meet different needs.
- Try to call on the Romanian diaspora, in spite of the potential limitations on who is allowed to teach in Romania, and under what conditions. It should be possible to invite external professors for a visit, a conference, or during a sabbatical.



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- Support the student association, with various help measures to be determined with the current members. The institution could look towards new ways of interacting with society, business and industry via such programmes as Demola<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The Demola course concept is a co-creation process where a multi-disciplinary team of students solves a real life challenge or problem together with a company, government agency or NGO. The company, government or NGO provides the problem to the course coordinator that gets students involved and with their creativity the outcome is something that the students can claim ownership over. The result is a solution, demo or prototype, to show to the company, government or NGO. If they like it they can proceed in licensing it from the students. At the same time students are provided with life experience, contacts and study credits besides the spillover effects that the course generates such as entrepreneurship and innovation. More information can be found on the Internet.  
<http://demola.net/about> be the best reference





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## 4. Research

As stated in its research strategy documents “Danubius University aims at becoming a symbol of competence, performance and requirements in the South-East of Romania and South-Eastern European area”. The document presents an overall research policy and objectives from the strategic development plan and applies to research, along four main axes: education; research; relation to society; and support services. The vice-rector for research finalises the strategy.

Research strategy is part of the institutional managerial plan. Each faculty establishes its own research strategy based on the managerial plan; then all the strategies are integrated in an operational plan. The current aim is to become an excellence centre, and for that purpose Danubius has initiated programmes with local enterprises and with other countries.

Research activities are examined in the SER, with a specific SWOT analysis. Research is organised according to plans made by research groups, which have been established by academics who share common interests. These groups may include students; it is an advantage for them as they learn more about the subject that way.

Researchers focus on applied research of direct interest to the environment. They try to identify research lines that could increase the number of research topics. The main line identified at the moment is the way the Romanian law has taken into account joining the European Union, e.g. for criminal law.

Joint research with other institutions, nationally or internationally has been set up such as, a joint MBA programme with Arcadia University in the US, a European FP7 project with Dortmund University on social innovation, and collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development on specific projects. Cooperation with public universities is possible, as defined about consortium, in the 2011 law on education (Chapt. III., Art.62, p.15). Multidisciplinary research also takes place, as for example, the project on how to increase the competitiveness of SMEs.

Support staff in research assist researchers to find documents and funding opportunities; they help with applying for research grants not only with the technical aspects but also with scientific writing; a week prior to the team’s second visit a seminar was held on academic writing. In addition, the research office delivers an assessment of research performance and prepares reports on research activities; each project has a management team that checks that the funds are spent according to specifications.

All academics are expected to produce at least one article per year. The active publishing house publishes journals in several languages, which can be consulted in the already well-supplied library.

While Danubius aims to become a centre of excellence, it does not have a doctoral school or co-responsibility for PhDs. To establish such a school it would need several full professors in



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the same field, which is not possible now and will not be in the foreseeable future. Thus teachers still working on their PhDs are supervised by professors from other institutions, with professors from Danubius providing informal supervision.

## Recommendations

The team believes that Danubius has found the optimal approach to research given the institutional context. Therefore the recommendations are:

- To continue concentrating on applied research of direct interest to its environment.
- To agree, as many staff members already do, that given the current context, setting up a doctoral school should not be regarded as a priority; instead to focus on what Danubius does best and to become a centre of excellence in teaching.
- To monitor and respond to calls for proposals that match the strategic research goals of the institution (see under “internationalisation” recommendations, below).



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## 5. Service to society

During meetings, although the emphasis seemed to be more on efforts to increase the international dimension, Danubius appears to be well-anchored and active in its region: the SER (pp. 9-10) lists a number of involvements; interviews mentioned local projects, such as consultancy with the Ministry of Rural Development, several stakeholders referred to collaboration with the university.

A project relevant to both service to society and internationalisation is one focused on eco-tourism, financed by a Ministry in Germany, to help the local community via an educational programme. Similarly, the FP7 project with Dortmund University focuses on social innovation.

The team notes a certain ambivalence about collaboration with other local HEIs: in some respects they are competitors, particularly when they offer the same programmes; in other respects they may benefit from working together.

The stakeholders' suggestion to develop a study programme on tourism industry has been well received and could contribute to expand an underdeveloped economic activity in the region.

According to the leadership, Danubius has good relations with the mayor (it was reported to the team that 70 municipal staff employees are Danubius graduates). This must be the result of an active and fruitful past collaboration, and should help in setting up new projects. In fact, a number of alumni are now in important positions, thus facilitating relations between the university and the local community.

DIBS represents a bridge between education and the business world: upon the request of companies, Danubius will organise specific training courses or provide consultancy. Then Danubius sees itself as part of the regional metropolitan area and is preoccupied by the Danube strategy.<sup>3</sup> Danubius initiated the move to establish a metropolitan platform with local companies, and EuroLim 4 with Danubian countries to focus on "Danube: axis of European identity", in four domain of research: Danubian economy, river legislation, Europe and Europeanism, communication and spirituality. EuroLim 4 organises annual conferences to foster economic and cultural cooperation.

Danubius has organised courses for various companies in Galați (e.g. Damen Shipyards, Mittal). According to interviewees, Danubius is breaking new grounds as this type of activity is new in Galați. In response to the demographic decline, this institution is trying to reform itself in order to survive, considering that Galați can be attractive as a regional centre, using the fact that it is located on the Eastern border of the EU, a region where they could focus on training public administration employees. This new direction of development may take time to produce results.

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<sup>3</sup> EU Strategy for the Danube region [www.danube-region.eu/about/the-danube-region](http://www.danube-region.eu/about/the-danube-region)



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Interviewees stated that there are few links between the private and public sectors in Romania; different programmes could be offered in this area, and the staff concerned want to be ready before other institutions recruit these new types of students coming from companies or from public organisations. For this reason Danubius launched the EMBA; however, they think there is no awareness of this type of programme in the region, and that currently companies do not have enough finances to fund this training. Thus the programme may not be ready to develop yet.

At the other end of the students range, Danubius has organised communication courses in secondary schools and expanded information sessions for them.

In summary, the team had the impression of a dynamic, open and resourceful institution with a definite entrepreneurial attitude. All the activities mentioned in this section should help establish Danubius' positive reputation, but also contribute to the mission shift, from purely education and research to more knowledge services (as stated on p. 9).

## Recommendations

The team was impressed by the number and level of activities reported in this section, all very meaningful for the institution's environment. However several external constraints– lack of awareness, lack of funds – and internal one – reduced staff, limited funds – lead the team to recommend:

- Given limited capacity, to strive for focus and critical mass. This recommendation could also apply to the choices of research topics.
- DIBS is an important initiative to be nurtured.



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## 6. Quality culture

In the SER as well as during the interviews, emphasis is placed on quality assurance, which “is one of the principles on which Danubius University bases its work ... in order to achieve and promote a genuine culture of quality” (SER, p. 20). It is noteworthy that the concept of quality culture is mentioned here, as well as the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

The structure and the internal regulations provide quality assurance. One of the Senate committees and an administrative department cover QA issues. The SER lists (p. 28) an impressive number of proposed or achieved measures as an implementation of operational plans. The team did not have the opportunity to further explore these measures and to clarify whether they include detailed action plans, deadlines, indicators, nor to what degree each individual goal has been achieved. However, each year the various units prepare their QA reports and the rector reports to the Senate on the overall university status, and on the degree to which the operational plan measures have been achieved.

Staff evaluations are completed regularly, following a standard procedure: self-assessment, student evaluation, peer evaluation, evaluation by the head of department. The procedures also include involvement of the head of human resources and Senate. They refer to a set of targets, which are determined for each person at the beginning of the academic year. The peer evaluation is based on a series of criteria, filled in anonymously online and centralised; course evaluations by students are similarly completed. If appropriate, in the case of negative feedback, the head of department will discuss the evaluation with the person in question. Up until now, this type of staff evaluation has been the basis for decisions on salary.

In the case of conflict, appeal procedures follow different reporting tracks, depending on whether they concern academics or administrative staff. For academics, appeals are normally carried out as follows: head of department, then academic council, then rector. For administrative staff, the rector decides on an appointment of commission at the faculty level to analyse any complaint. But as mentioned above, no ombudsman functions in the university: the concept was new and appealing to the staff interviewed.

Quality assurance involves staff development: besides evaluations, language courses and coaching on adapting to change were offered in 2013. In addition, academics have received specific training in distance or part-time education modes as slight differences exist between these two approaches.

Special measures are taken for the examination for distance learners: presence at Danubius and supervision during exam sessions. Regarding quality assurance, specific procedures have been set in response to ARACIS requirements and are monitored by the IT coordinator.

Danubius received the ISO 9001 certificate in 2008 and was in the process of renewing the certification at the time of this evaluation. Danubius was rated “limited trust” by ARACIS in 2011. According to leadership, in its drive for quality, ARACIS had set a number of “norms” with which an institution had to conform. Thus at institutional level the focus was on



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complying with ARACIS requirements, perceived as bureaucratic. But in the view of the university leadership ARACIS priorities may be changing towards broader quality culture principles and this may give individual institutions more autonomy in pursuing their own approach to quality culture. After a completely new evaluation, ARACIS granted a higher “trust” rating, which was communicated just prior to the team’s second visit.

To face the demographic crisis and the declining enrolment, academics intend to ensure that they offer quality programmes (focus on quality) that will attract students. At the same time they try to extend the range of programmes offered, to constantly adapt to the needs of the job market. While this attempt is commendable, some questions must be asked: In this drive to meet the demands is there a risk of kowtowing to the market? How to balance the quest for knowledge with the students’ need to find jobs?

### Recommendations

During the two visits and in the documents submitted, the team observed a clear concern about quality, in administrative processes as well as in teaching, for which Danubius can be commended. Therefore the team recommends:

- To maintain the quality culture, carefully avoiding increase in bureaucracy which costs staff time.
- To consider the Ministers’ recommendations in the latest Bucharest Bologna Process Communiqué for continuous improvement.



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## 7. Internationalisation

The Danubius leadership emphasises the international dimension. They consider that a key to improving the current difficult situation is to become more international.

An office has been established to develop international activities and coordinate the various agreements and programmes; in order to ensure that the university would receive at least the same funding as the previous year for Erasmus support, each year it requests a slightly higher amount; language courses are offered, as well as courses taught in English; Danubius just applied to the extended Erasmus programme; the university encourages staff members to attend conferences abroad if they apply for that, and if funding is available.

One criticism that ARACIS expressed when it gave the “limited trust” rating was that Danubius lacked international involvement. Consequently, the institution worked at developing this aspect, which has now become one of the main goals.

Danubius is moving towards more European involvement via mobility programmes and more research grants. However they do not expect a great increase in participation as young student populations are decreasing, or at least stagnating, in many countries in Europe.

Danubius has signed a number of agreements with institutions in other countries for mobility programmes – Erasmus, exchanges – or joint programmes such as joint MBA with Arcadia in the US, or partnership with Piraeus University in Greece for a Master programme on Shipping International Trade and Finance.

Thus, it would seem that Danubius is quite active in this area. However, interviews revealed that staff mobility programmes were of short duration, mostly, as implied in discussions, for financial reasons; few students are involved in going abroad (see above, under “Teaching and Learning”); yet the few who did find the experience very enriching recommended it to their fellow students. Few foreign students attend Danubius as part of an exchange programme, in part because of the language barrier. In addition, the staff need to improve their fluency in other languages.

The website presents a whole section on international activities. However, initial pages are often in Romanian. The team was informed that the website was being redesigned to include more information in English. From the description available on the website, it would seem that entire programmes are delivered in English, but interviews would indicate that these are still being considered.

Actually, internationalisation activities contribute to the mission shift via, for example, international conferences such as those organised within the EuroLim 4 project.

The main difficulty is that of visibility, which takes time to build while the drive towards more international involvement is fairly recent, mostly in the last two or three years. The internationalisation office has devised a step-by-step, long-term strategy: first, concentrate on mobility; then use the diplomatic channels to develop contacts, thanks to the leaders’



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connections in the diplomatic corps in Bucharest. As a result, Danubius started creating a network, and is now trying to organise a Balkan conference on quality assurance in higher education.

## Recommendations

From what it learned in the documents and through the meetings, it is obvious to the team that Danubius is striving hard, in several directions, to establish its position on the international scene in particular within the Eastern European region – Moldova, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece. Yet progress is still needed in this area, for which the following recommendations are offered

- To make sure to integrate all internationalisation activities within an all-encompassing development strategy.
- To develop the staff language skills.
- To respond to European calls from such programmes as Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, Smart Specialisation Strategies,
- Another possible source: European Cohesion Funds. Romania negotiated high agreements for education, which opens many opportunities.





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## 8. Conclusion and recommendations

In this evaluation, the IEP team found an institution that exhibits resourceful characteristics. It has to face numerous challenges. The legal framework imposes constraining structures which can increase the bureaucracy. The depressed economic environment limits expansion opportunities at local level. The major drop in student enrolment in the last two years causes a series of negative consequences such as reduced income, and therefore a need to limit the number of staff as well as salary decreases which may affect staff morale, and restrict policy initiatives. Reduced income is also at the source of increased pressure – increased workloads, reduced salaries -on both academic and administrative staff, with risk of demotivation.

Faced with difficult circumstances, the leadership as well as the entire staff strive to find alternate solutions, to diversify approaches and offers. To meet its many challenges, Danubius can count on a committed staff and enthusiastic student population and a dedicated alumni network.

The institution has already shown its ability to change in order to adapt and improve. Nevertheless, on the Danubius path to continuous improvement the team can offer some suggestions which are detailed in each section of this report and can be summarised as follows:

*Define a clear development strategy, prioritise objectives, delegate whenever feasible, take advantage of European and other opportunities.*

To sum up, a list of all recommendations included in this report is available below.

Regarding governance, the team recommends that the university:

- Develop contingency plans for various scenarios, given the uncertainties regarding the future.
- Prioritise the objectives and define a realistic implementation plan, in view of the many projects undertaken and the concomitant means reduction.
- Delegate some responsibilities and some tasks currently concentrated, in the given context, at the level of the rectorship.
- Invest in human capital, academic and support staff, who represent the key asset of the university; develop a policy to attract and retain good staff.
- Ensure efficient management of the institutions by filling key vacancies as a matter of urgency.
- Encourage discussion of assessment criteria for academic and support staff, thus increasing understanding and acceptance of the process on the part of those concerned.



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- Pay attention to the risk of further salary cuts and absence of clear reward scheme which may cause demotivation among staff.
- Take into consideration that the campus culture may be affected by increased diversity in student population (employees, mature “second chance” students, distance learners, foreign students).
- Create the position of a neutral ombudsman.
- Expand and diversify its funding sources. The prevalence of tuition fees as main source of funding can become a threat to the institution’s financial stability in the context of declining demographics and shrinking of the student pool.
- Include risk evaluation in the elaboration of the budget.

Regarding teaching and learning, the team recommends that the university:

- Continue doing what is well done, for example maintaining a positive atmosphere, trying to diversify educational offers in order to meet different needs.
- Invite external professors for a visit, a conference, or during a sabbatical. Try to call on the Romanian diaspora, in spite of the potential limitations on who is allowed to teach in Romania, and under what conditions.
- Support the student association, with various help measures to be determined with the current members. Explore new ways of interacting with society, business and industry via programmes such as Demola.

Regarding research, the team recommends that the university:

- Continue concentrating on applied research of direct interest to its environment.
- Agree, as many staff members already do, that given the current context, setting up a doctoral school should not be regarded as a priority; instead to focus on what Danubius does best and to become a centre of excellence in teaching.
- Monitor and respond to calls for proposals that match the strategic research goals of the institution (see under “internationalisation” recommendations, below).

Regarding service to society, the team recommends that the university:

- Strive for focus and critical mass, given limited capacity. This recommendation could also apply to the choices of research topics.
- Further nurture important initiatives such as DIBS.

Regarding quality culture, the team recommends that the university:

- Maintain the quality culture, carefully avoiding increase in bureaucracy which costs staff time.
- Consider the Ministers’ recommendations in the latest Bucharest Bologna Process Communiqué for continuous improvement.



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



GUVERNUL ROMÂNIEI



Fondul Social European  
POSDRU 2007-2013



Instrumente Structurale  
2007-2013



MINISTERUL  
EDUCAȚIEI  
NAȚIONALE

OIPOSDRU

*UE Fiscali*

UNITATEA EXECUTIVĂ PENTRU  
FINANȚAREA ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTULUI  
SUPERIOR, A CERCETĂRII,  
DEZVOLTĂRII ȘI INOVĂRII



IEP  
EUA-Institutional Evaluation Programme



EUA  
European University Association

Regarding internationalisation, the team recommends that the university:

- Make sure to integrate all internationalisation activities within an all-encompassing development strategy.
- Develop the staff language skills.
- Respond to European calls from such programmes as Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, Smart Specialisation Strategies,
- Monitor opportunities and apply for grants available under the European Cohesion Fund.