

Approval of the Application
by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
(ARACIS)
for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register

Register Committee
 [2-3 April 2019]

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| Application of: | 09/03/2017 |
| Agency registered since: | 07/10/2009 |
| External review report of: | 13/09/2018 |
| Review coordinated by: | ENQA - European Association for Quality Assurance of Higher Education |
| Review panel members: | David William Cairns (chair), Agnes Leinweber, Hannele Marjatta Niemi (academic), Simona Dimovska (student) |
| Decision of: | 03/04/2019 |
| Registration until: | 30/09/2023 |
| Absented themselves from decision-making: | nobody |
| Attachments: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confirmation of eligibility, 24/03/2017 2. External Review Report, 13/09/2018 (see separate file) 3. Request to the Review Panel, 12/11/2018 4. Clarification by the Review Panel, 26/11/2018 5. Additional Representation by ARACIS, 15/02/2019 |

1. The application of 09/03/2017 adhered to the requirements of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.
2. The Register Committee confirmed eligibility of the application on 24/03/2017.
3. The Register Committee considered the external review report of 13/09/2018 on the compliance of ARACIS with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015 version).
4. The Register Committee further considered the Substantive Change Report on the evaluation procedure of Master Studies Domains (of 28/09/2018).
5. The Register Committee sought and received clarification from the chair of the review panel (of 26/11/2018).

Register Committee considered ARACIS's additional representation of 15/02/2019.

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Analysis:

7. In considering ARACIS's compliance with the ESG, the Register Committee took into account:
 - *Programme External Evaluation/ Accreditation - First Cycle, Second Cycle.*
 - *Institutional External Evaluation/ Accreditation.*
 - *Evaluation of Master Study Domains.*
 - *Programme External Evaluation from the engineering field (for the EUR-ACE Label).*
 - *Reviews carried out abroad (Moldova).*
8. The Register Committee found that the report provides sufficient evidence and analysis on ARACIS's level of compliance with the ESG.
9. With regard to the specific European Standards and Guidelines, the Register Committee considered the following:

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ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

The Register Committee noted that according to the self-evaluation report (SAR p. 33) consistency in the external QA activities of ARACIS is assured through the work of the Permanent Speciality Commissions that prepare decisions for the Council in their respective field of studies.

As the Register Committee could not corroborate the agency's statement in the analysis of the review report, the Committee sought further clarification from the panel.

In its response letter the panel stated that it is the responsibility of each Permanent Speciality Commission to ensure that judgements in ARACIS reports are accurate and consistent and the panel was convinced that all processes defined in the Methodology are implemented consistently.

Having found limited information in the panel's analysis on the functioning of provisional authorisation for programmes and higher education institutions, the Committee has asked the panel to confirm that the key features of ESG 2.3 (self-assessment, external assessment, site visit, review report, follow-up) are implemented by ARACIS in these reviews.

In its response letter the panel confirmed that following the detailed examination of ARACIS's Methodology and Guide, the agency followed the same procedures for provisional authorisation as the ones employed for the evaluation of accredited programmes, which were addressed by the panel in its review report (p. 31).

Having considered the panel's clarification the Register Committee was able to concur with the panel's conclusion that ARACIS complies with the standard.

The Committee nevertheless underlined the panel's suggestion on the need to further develop the follow-up procedures of the agency and to consider how institutions have addressed the ARACIS's recommendations in their evaluation reports.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

In its last review, the Register Committee flagged the participation of students in ARACIS's programme level reviews.

The Register Committee noted that ARACIS has formally adopted in 2017 a decision to include students in all programme level evaluation panels. While the panel confirmed the practice of involving students as review experts in all ARACIS's reviews, including at programme level, the panel added that at the time of its review the agency had had little practical experience. The panel further commented that "*some evaluation panels treated student members as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators in the review exercise and that some evaluators were not attuned to the necessity for 'student centeredness' in higher education and what that required of tutors and of them as evaluators.*" (Review Report, p. 35)

In its additional representation ARACIS stated that it was surprised by the review panel's assessment and argued that the review report does not provide information on how many of these situations evaluation panels treated student members "as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators". The agency only heard of a few cases from student representatives in the Council but no formal complaints have ever been submitted. Considering the high number of external evaluations ARACIS carries out, the agency found that, in fact, such situations were rather the exception than common practice.

ARACIS also commented that its policies and procedures gave students equal rights and obligations i.e. the coverage of mission costs and remuneration is the same as for the other members, and that students are required to participate in the Council, the Permanent Speciality Commission and expert panels. (p. 8-9) ARACIS further added that one of the aspects considered in the selection process of the Permanent Speciality Commission in 2018 was the understanding of students' role and involvement in quality assurance activities.

The Register Committee noted that, while ARACIS regularly offers training sessions for its evaluators, the panel found that the format for training sessions offered few opportunities for learning through simulation and practical exercise and that the 'virtual' and 'online' training were lacking in efficacy.

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In the additional representation, ARACIS clarified that the e-platform is a complementary facility to the face to face training sessions and not a substitute. The platform offers access to courses on ARACIS procedures, analysis and evaluation sheets (forms) and it is used to disseminate information on evaluations. ARACIS explained that the trainings for experts are thematic and concentrate on the methodology for external evaluation, standards and performance indicators, including real life simulations. The agency provided a list of past training sessions focused on the practical activity of the Permanent Speciality Commissions.

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Having considered the additional representation the Register Committee concluded that ARACIS has addressed the flag and was therefore able to concur with the review panel's conclusion of compliance with ESG 2.4.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

In its previous decision to renew registration the Register Committee flagged for attention ARACIS's involvement of expert panels in drafting and agreeing upon the review report for institutional evaluations.

To address the flagged issues the panel noted that ARACIS decided to prepare a comprehensive synthetic report in which each of the expert panel members have a contribution. The panel also commented that separate reports from students and international evaluators are still a feature of the agency's reporting arrangements.

While the Register Committee welcomed the panel's recommendations on improving the accessibility, storage, organisation and presentation of review decisions and reports on its website, it considered that ARACIS technically fulfilled the requirements of the standard by publishing the reports on the web. The Register Committee however noted that the full accessibility of reports remains an issue as long as some reports are published in an archived or scanned format.

The Register Committee concluded that ARACIS largely addressed the flag and was therefore unable to concur with the review panel's judgement of partial compliance, but concluded that ARACIS complies with standard 2.6.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

The Register Committee noted that ARACIS does not have a permanent appeals body but with each new case an ad hoc commission is established by the Executive Board to deal with. The agency explained that the small number of appeals and complaints it has received to date did not justify moving to more permanent arrangements of handling complaints and appeals.

The Register Committee found that the involvement of the Executive Board of the Council in establishing appeals committees might interfere with the integrity of the decision making process and has therefore asked the panel for further information on the criteria and selection procedure of the ad-hoc Appeals Committee members.

The panel noted in its response letter that it has no information on the criteria ARACIS follows when it constitutes ad hoc panels and that the panel was uneasy with the ad hoc approach.

The documentation provided by the agency in its additional representation shows that the nomination of Appeals Commission members follows ARACIS' operational procedure 'Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions'.

The agency explained that its (ad-hoc) Appeals Commission includes one member of the consultative commission (i.e. academics, former Council or Commissions members), external evaluators from the National Register of Evaluators and one inspector from the Quality Assurance Direction (technical department of ARACIS). Over the past four years the Appeals Commissions received 46 appeals, about 1.93% of the total of number of external evaluations performed by ARACIS.

ARACIS argued that the Executive Board is delegated to manage the activity of the agency and therefore is involved in the selection process of Appeals Commission members. The selection process follows strictly defined criteria that would not allow the Executive Board's interference with the decision making on the appeal.

While the Register Committee welcomed the clarification on the appeals process and the publication of 'ARACIS Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions', the Committee noted that the members nominated to act in the Appeals Committee are not published and that the revised procedure is not easily accessible on the website.

The Committee therefore underlined that more steps are needed to ensure full transparency in the agency's handling of appeals. It therefore could not follow the review panel's conclusion of compliance and concluded that ARACIS, complies only partially with ESG 2.7.

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

The Register Committee noted the review panel's concerns with the internal arrangements of the agency and has therefore asked the panel to clarify in what way have these arrangements affected ARACIS' operations.

In its response letter, the panel stated that its concerns referred to the oversight of ARACIS' operations rather than the operations themselves i.e. in particular how the Council ensured an effective "oversight" of the agency's work considering that the Executive Board was closely involved in managing and overseeing these operations.

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The Committee was unable to follow the panel's concerns, as it was not obvious how exactly the organisational arrangements (negatively) affected the agency's operations.

With regards to the agency's vision mission and strategy, the panel stated that ARACIS "does not have a strategic plan that spans several years and does not appear to set targets for itself against which its Council and others can measure the Agency's performance" (Review report p. 17).

Considering the involvement of stakeholders, the Register Committee noted that this is limited to representatives of students and employers sitting in ARACIS Council and Permanent Speciality Commissions. In the view of the panel, ARACIS tended to define the term 'stakeholder' narrowly, confining it to students, employers and trades union representatives and the panel was not confident that ARACIS understands the need to involve stakeholders more fully in the work of the Council and the work of ARACIS.

In its additional representation, ARACIS noted that it has followed up on the recommendations of the panel and it has developed a Strategic plan for the period 2018-2021 and the operational plans for 2018 and 2019, which were approved by the ARACIS Council. The Register Committee could verify the published plans.

The agency further provided a detailed overview on how representatives of stakeholders i.e. academics, representatives of students, representatives of employers and employers' federation, representative of trade-unions, including one representative of ESU and ENQA.- participate in the council and different commissions of ARACIS.

ARACIS further explained that it has recently approved the inclusion of representatives of employers in the permanent Speciality Commissions, with priority the Commission of Engineering Sciences that awards the EUR-ACE label, and that the selection process for new members will be soon initiated.

The agency added that it has put forward a project application for "Stakeholder Engagement in QA" under a call of the Erasmus+ programme. The project aims to promote the diversification of stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance activities across EHEA and to provide the means for making the involvement of stakeholders effective.

The Register Committee welcomed the agency's newly adopted strategic and operational work plans and was satisfied with the level of stakeholder involvement in the work and governance of the agency. The Register Committee therefore could not follow the panel's conclusion of partial compliance and concluded that ARACIS complies with ESG 3.1.

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3.4 – Thematic analysis

While the panel found that none of the research projects described by ARACIS in its self assessment report met the requirement of the standard, the panel nevertheless formed the view that the agency is (fully) compliant with ESG 3.4, based on the Quality Barometer reports produced for 2009, 2010 and 2015.

The Register Committee could not conclude on the basis of the panel’s analysis whether the agency made use of the outcomes of these analysis and whether the Barometer reports are conducted on a regular basis. The Committee has therefore asked the panel for further clarifications.

In its response the panel stated that it was keen to see that ARACIS continues its commitment to the Quality Barometer series and reiterated its appreciation for the agency’s dedication in preparing them, even though it comes at a substantial financial and management burden on the agency.

With a view to the application of Quality Barometers, the panel stated that they are used by ARACIS to engage with quality professionals, academics, students, and others throughout Romania and to disseminate aspects related to higher education to interested parties.

In light of the panel’s clarification the Register Committee concurred with the panel’s conclusion that ARACIS complies with ESG 3.4.

3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The review report noted an improvement in the agency’s internal quality assurance process and encouraged ARACIS to continue with its work to introduce IQA, seeking ways to express its quality assurance expectations for its evaluation and other academic-based activities.

The panel also stressed the need for ARACIS’s internal QA to be improved so as to support the work of its speciality commissions, responsible for the consistency check of evaluation reports and for preparing the Council’s decisions. The panel found that the members of Permanent Speciality Commissions do not have access to the searchable digital copies of evaluation reports, and that they are provided with a pile of reports the day before the meeting, thus being prevented in making their own judgements on the findings of individual reports.

While the panel stated that ARACIS newly introduced comprehensive IQA procedures and new staff member will provide the agency with a sound basis for reviewing and improving the effectiveness with which it works, the Register Committee found this has not been implemented at the time of the review, in particular in supporting the internal activity of its speciality commissions.

ARACIS explained in its additional representation that the procedure to fill in the positions for the Internal public audit department has been delayed due to a temporary staff hiring interdiction in the public sector.

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As the interdiction has been lifted the agency started to fill in these positions.

The agency further stated that the Permanent Speciality Commissions are supported in their work by the experts and speciality inspectors for accreditation and quality assurance (permanent staff of the agency) providing all the logistics and necessary material. After the site visit each member of the Permanent Speciality Commission receives by e-mail, for analysis, the documents drafted by the visit panel. The panel coordinator of the site visit also presents the results in front of the Permanent Specialty Commission who takes the final decision.

According to the agency the documentation on previous external evaluations and recommendations can be found on the ARACIS website, searchable using keywords.

The Register Committee found that indeed reports can be found using keywords, however the content of reports can not be searched by keywords. The Committee also noted that the agency has made little progress in making its reports machine-readable (p. 5) since its last review.

While the Register Committee welcomed the hiring of new staff to support the agency's IQA procedures, the Committee noted that the hiring process has yet to be finalised and that the changes to the IQA have yet to be implemented in practice. The Committee also underlined the need to ensure 'searchable digital copies' of review reports to facilitate the decision making of the Permanent Speciality Commission.

The Register Committee therefore could not follow the panel's conclusion of compliance, and considered that ARACIS complies only partially with ESG 3.6.

10. For the remaining standards, the Register Committee was able to concur with the review panel's analysis and conclusion without further comments.

Conclusion:

11. Based on the external review report and the considerations above, the Register Committee concluded that ARACIS demonstrated compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3) as follows:

| Standard | Review panel conclusion | Register Committee conclusion |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2.1 | Substantial compliance | Compliance |
| 2.2 | Substantial compliance | Compliance |
| 2.3 | Full compliance | Compliance |
| 2.4 | Full compliance | Compliance |
| 2.5 | Full compliance | Compliance |
| 2.6 | Partial compliance | Compliance |

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| 2.7 | Full compliance | Partial compliance |
| 3.1 | Partial compliance | Compliance |
| 3.2 | Full compliance | Compliance |
| 3.3 | Full compliance | Compliance |
| 3.4 | Full compliance | Compliance |
| 3.5 | Substantial compliance | Compliance |
| 3.6 | Substantial compliance | Partial compliance |
| 3.7 | (not expected) | Compliance (by virtue of applying) |

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12. **The Register Committee considered that ARACIS only achieved partial compliance with some standards. In its holistic judgement, the Register Committee concluded that these are specific and limited issues, but that ARACIS continues to comply substantially with the ESG as a whole.**
13. **The Register Committee therefore approved the application for renewal of inclusion on the Register. ARACIS's renewed inclusion shall be valid until 30/09/2023¹.**
14. The Register Committee further underlined that ARACIS is expected to address the issues mentioned appropriately and to resolve them at the earliest opportunity as well as to inform EQAR through Substantive Change Reports where required.

¹ Inclusion is valid for five years from the date of the external review report, see §4.1 of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)
Iordan Petrescu, President
Bd. Marasti no. 59

**011464 BUCHAREST
ROMANIA**

Brussels, 24/03/2017

Confirmation of Eligibility: Application for Renewal of Registration Application no. A54 of 09/03/2017

Dear Iordan,

We hereby confirm that the application by ARACIS for renewal of registration is eligible.

Based on the information and draft terms of reference provided, the external review coordinated by ARACIS fulfils the requirements of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.

We confirm that the following activities of ARACIS are within the scope of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG):

- *Programme External Evaluation/ Accreditation - First Cycle, Second Cycle.*
- *Institutional External Evaluation/ Accreditation.*
- *Evaluation of Master Study Domains.*

In the application form, ARACIS stated that it did not consider *Programme External Evaluation from the engineering field (as part of EUR-ACE Label of first cycle degrees)* to be an activity within the scope of the ESG. We considered the information provided and came to the conclusion that this activity is within the scope of the ESG as it includes evaluations of programmes related to teaching and learning (see Use and Interpretation of the ESG¹). This activity should thus be analysed in the external review of ARACIS.

Please ensure that the self-evaluation report covers all the aforementioned activities including reviews carried out by ARACIS abroad (i.e. external quality assurance activities carried out by ARACIS in Moldova).

¹ See Scope and Applicability of the ESG, page 2

https://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/RC_12_1_UseAndInterpretationOfTheESG_v1_0.pdf

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We further note that ARACIS will develop procedures for the recognition of external quality assurance activities of other quality assurance bodies following the ruling of the Romanian Minister of National Education and Scientific Research (no. 6154/2016). If the procedures are developed before November 2017, they should be addressed as part of the external review of ARACIS, thus making it unnecessary to be raised again in a Substantive Change Report.

We further remind you that the following issues were flagged when ARACIS's registration was last renewed, and should be addressed in your self-evaluation report and the external review report:

ESG 2.6 Reporting [ESG 2005: standard 3.7]

For institutional evaluations, it should receive explicit attention whether the entire expert panel is involved in drafting and agreeing upon the main evaluation report.

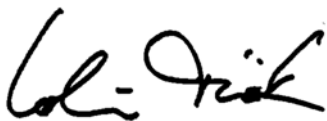
ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts [ESG 2005: standard 3.7]

It should receive attention whether ARACIS has further developed the participation of students in the expert groups for programme reviews.

We will forward this letter to ENQA in its capacity of the coordinator of the external review. At the same time we underline that it is ARACIS' responsibility to ensure that the coordinator and review panel take account of the present confirmation, so as to ensure that all activities mentioned are analysed by the panel.

This confirmation is made according to the relevant provisions of the EQAR Procedures for Applications. ARACIS has the right to appeal this decision in accordance with the Appeals Procedure; any appeal must reach EQAR within 90 days from receipt of this decision.

Yours sincerely,



Colin Tück
(Director)

Cc: ENQA (review coordinator)

Brussels, 12 November 2018

Application by ARACIS for renewal of registration on EQAR

Dear Dr Cairns,

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) has made an application for renewal of registration/initial inclusion on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

We are contacting you in your capacity as chair of the panel that prepared the external review report of 13/09/2018 on which ARACIS's application is based.

The EQAR Register Committee's rapporteurs have been considering the application and the external review report. We would be obliged if you could clarify, in consultation with the panel members as necessary, some matters in order to contribute to the consideration of ARACIS's application:

1. ESG 2.3: According to the self-evaluation report (SAR p. 33) consistency in the external QA activities of ARACIS is assured through the work of the Permanent Speciality Commissions that prepares decisions for the Council in their respective field of studies.

As the Register Committee rapporteurs could not corroborate this statement within the analysis of the review panel **could you please clarify whether the panel has considered how the agency ensures that its processes are implemented consistently, and if so could please elaborate on this matter?**

Could you please further expand on how the key features of ESG 2.3 (self-assessment, external assessment, site visit, review report, follow-up) are implemented by ARACIS in case of *provisional authorisation to operate* (for study programmes and higher education institutions)?

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2. The panel noted that ARACIS does not have a permanent appeals commission but for each new case an ad hoc commission is established by the Executive Board of the Council.

Could you please elaborate on the panel's analysis of the criteria and selection procedure for the members of the ad hoc appeal commissions?

3. While the review report describes the appeals and complaints processes for the external evaluation of study programmes and institutions, no information is provided on how the agency handles appeals and complaints for the evaluation of Master Study Domains.

Could you please further elaborate on the panel's analysis of appeals and complaints processes for those evaluations?

4. In the interest of transparency, accountability, and good governance; the panel recommended that ARACIS draws more clearly the roles of its governing bodies and separates the role of the President of the Council from that of a Chief Executive Officer, and the confirms the role of the Secretary-General as the Chief Operating Officer of ARACIS. (p. 16)

Considering the above mentioned recommendations, could you please clarify in what way have the current arrangements affected ARACIS's operations?

5. The panel noted that the agency is (fully) compliant with ESG 3.4, based on the Quality Barometer reports produced for 2009, 2010 and 2015.


Could you clarify if the review panel considered whether the agency made use of the outcomes of these analysis and if they are conducted on a regular basis?

We would be grateful if it was possible for you to respond by 28 November 2018, and we would appreciate if you get in contact with us should that not be feasible.

Please note that EQAR will publish this request and your response together with the final decision on ARACIS's application. We, however, kindly ask you to keep information related to the application confidential until the final decision has been published.

We acknowledge that it might not be possible to clarify all of the above. However, we appreciate your assistance and I shall be at your disposal if you have any questions in relation to this request.

Kind regards,



Colin Tück
(Director)

Cc: Agnes Leinweber (Panel Secretary)
ENQA (coordinator)
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By email

26 November 2018

Dear Colin Tück

Ref: Application by ARACIS for renewal of registration on EQAR

Thank you for your letter of 12 November seeking clarity on behalf of the Register Committee's Rapporteurs on particular matters in the ENQA external review report for ARACIS published on 13 September 2018 (the Report).¹ Thank you also for the opportunity that this has provided for me to confer with my colleague Agnes Leinweber, Panel Secretary, as we have worked to respond to the Rapporteur's requests.

1.ESG 2.3

Request to verify the role of the Permanent Specialty Commissions in ensuring that ARACIS review processes are implemented consistently.

We refer you to p.9 of the Report. This describes how the Council of ARACIS chooses five of its members to form the Executive Board of ARACIS, which oversees and manages the day-to-day management of the Agency. The Executive Board nominates evaluators based on a proposal by the Head of the relevant Permanent Specialty Commission (PSC).²

Two members of the Executive Board serve as Directors of the Departments for Accreditations and for External Quality Evaluation respectively. They are responsible for every step of each procedure mentioned in ESG 2.3. The primary responsibility of each PSC is summarised in the Report as "to ensure that judgements in reports are made accurately and consistently between evaluation panels and the institutions they report on."³ The ENQA panel was convinced that all the processes defined in

¹ Please note that all page references are to the Report as published on ENQA's web site at <https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ARACIS-External-Review-Report-2018.pdf>

² See also Report p.32, ESG 2.4.

³ Report p.10

the Methodology are implemented consistently. This could have been outlined more precisely.

2. ESG 2.3

“[To clarify] how the key features of ESG 2.3 (self-assessment, external assessment, site visit, review report, follow-up) are implemented by ARACIS in case of provisional authorisation to operate (for study programmes and higher education institutions)?

The Report states that the requirements of the Methodology⁴ and the Guide⁵ that ARACIS follows for the evaluation of accredited programmes are the same.⁶ In order to make this statement the ENQA panel examined the Methodology and the Guide in detail. On this basis the ENQA panel was able to confirm that the pattern of procedures followed by ARACIS for provisional authorisations and accreditations for programmes and for institutions are as described on p.31 of the Report.

2. Could you please elaborate on the panel's analysis of the criteria and selection procedure for the members of the ad hoc appeal commissions?

We are sorry to report that we have no information on the criteria ARACIS follows when it constitutes the ad hoc panels it presently uses to hear appeals from institutions. It was the ENQA panel's unease with this ad hoc approach, and the absence of further information about how appeals panels operate, that led the panel to recommend that ARACIS should take steps to make its appeals procedure better known.

3. ESG 2.7

Appeals and complaints procedures for Masters Domains.

ARACIS follows the same appeals and complaints procedures for Masters Domains as for other study programme evaluations. See above. Complaints procedures for procedural or ethical failings are described on p.44 of the Report

4. Recommendation.

In the interest of transparency, accountability, and good governance the panel recommends that the respective responsibilities of the Council, the President, the Executive Board and the Secretary General should be more clearly drawn in the interests of transparency, accountability and good governance and that a Chief Executive Officer, separate from the President, should be appointed. (p.18)

Considering the above mentioned recommendations, could you please clarify in what way have the current arrangements affected ARACIS's operations?

The recommendation is to do with the oversight of operations rather than the operations themselves As the Report states, members of the Council and the Executive Board are so intimately involved in managing and participating in the operations of ARACIS that it was difficult for the ENQA panel, as outsiders, to see

⁴ 'Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference, and list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education' (the [Methodology](#))

⁵ [Quality Evaluation Activities Guide for University Study Programmes and for Higher Education Institutions](#), ARACIS web site.

⁶ Report p.11

how the Council overall could serve as an effective “oversight” body for all that ARACIS does.⁷

5. Could you clarify if the review panel considered whether [ARACIS] made use of the outcomes of its [Quality Barometer work] and if [these exercises] are conducted on a regular basis?

The 2018 Report praised the Agency’s continuing commitment to its Quality Barometer (QB) series of publications. For each QB publication ARACIS undertakes a substantial programme of applied qualitative and quantitative research with (as was the case in the 2015 QB) a transnational and comparative dimension. Such a publication places substantial financial and management burdens on ARACIS and the ENQA panel was keen to see the Agency continue with the QB series.

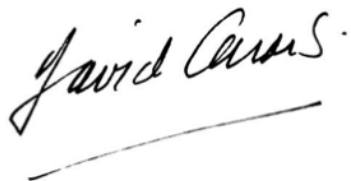
In its SAR, ARACIS reported that it used the QB publications to engage with quality professionals, academics, students, and others throughout Romania and to disseminate understanding of the Bologna Process, the European Standards and Guidelines, and other developments across the European Higher Education Area to stakeholders and other interested parties.

As noted in the Report,⁸ for higher education in Romania the QB publications provide an authoritative source of information about the context, prospects, and challenges for higher education both within Romania and set in the wider context of the EHEA. The 2018 panel, like its predecessor in 2013, considered that the commitment of ARACIS to continue with the QB series while operating a very substantial programme of reviews, accreditations and evaluations was noteworthy.

We hope that these responses will assist the Committee’s Rapporteurs

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Cairns". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Dr David Cairns
ENQA Panel Chair

⁷ Report p.16

⁸ Report pp.7-8, footnotes



Additional representation of ARACIS - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register – EQAR

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0. Introduction

In the letter received by ARACIS - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education from the Register Committee [5-6 December 2018] Ref. RC22/A54. Ver. 1.0, Date 2018-12-18, Page 1 / 6 it is stating that:

„Since ARACIS only achieved partial compliance with a number of standards and thus fails to meet some key requirements of the ESG, in its holistic judgement on the basis of the documentation available and the considerations above, the Register Committee was unable to conclude that ARACIS complies substantially with the ESG as a whole. ARACIS is requested to make additional representation by 15 March 2019 at the latest.”

Consequently, the present document addresses the standards at which the Register Committee („RC”) did not find in the ENQA Agency Review report sufficient information to conclude that ARACIS complies substantially with the ESG. The argumentation below, addressing the different ESG standards for which the judgement of the RC is partial compliance, begins with Support information and evidence (as background information) and is finalised with Conclusions.

In the *Support information and evidence* presentations reference is made to ARACIS governing legislation (laws, government decisions), Council and Executive Board Decisions, but also to ARACIS *System* and/or *Operational* procedures - that are part of the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQA) of the agency. The *System* and *Operational* procedures are, according to the Romanian legislation governing the activity of public institutions, internal documents published only in the intranet of the agency since they might contain personal data¹. In cases when the procedures contain elements of interest for the external stakeholders (i.e. selection and activity of experts – ESG 2.4, addressing complaints and appeals – ESG 2.7 etc.), the procedures are published also on the agency website, with measures for protecting personal data.

¹ The *System procedures* apply to processes involving all departments of the institution, while the *Operational procedures* apply to processes involving only one or several organizational structures of the institution.

1 ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

In its last review, the Register Committee flagged the participation of students in ARACIS's programme level reviews.

The Register Committee noted that ARACIS has formally adopted in 2017 a decision to include students in all programme level evaluation panels. While the panel confirmed the practice of involving students as review experts in all ARACIS's reviews, including at programme level, the panel further stated that at the time of its review the agency had had little practical experience. The panel further commented that "*some evaluation panels treated student members as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators in the review exercise and that some evaluators were not attuned to the necessity for 'student centeredness' in higher education and what that required of tutors and of them as evaluators.*" (Review Report, p. 35)

The Register Committee further noted that, while ARACIS regularly offers training sessions for its evaluators, the panel found that *the format for training sessions offered few opportunities for learning through simulation and practical exercise and that the 'virtual' and 'online' training were lacking in efficacy.*

The presentation in this section starts with the second finding of the RC, namely **training sessions for evaluators** and continues with the first one - referring to the **Review Report, p. 35, tackling student participation in the panel and student centeredness, as we believe that, beside adequate procedures which are in place, selection of qualified experts as peer – reviewers and their regularly effective training are crucial for achieving the proposed results of QA procedures.**

1.1 Support information and evidence on selection of experts and training sessions for the experts-evaluators (Background information)

From the beginning of its activity ARACIS has considered as high priority the development and permanent up-dating of a comprehensive data-base – the National Register of Evaluators (available at <http://www.aracis.ro/organizare/registrul-national-de-evaluatori/>) – RNE that contains experts – evaluators for different scientific fields and with different backgrounds. They can offer different perspectives on the QA processes, since they represent various stakeholders: academics, students, employers/professional practitioners, and international experts.

Presently, RNE includes 1223 academics(https://pfe.aracis.ro/inscriere/registru/lista_comisii/) 186 students (included in the register section for students RNE-S http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Registru_Evaluatori/Total_RNE_S_ian_2019.xls and 103 representatives of employers http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Registru_Evaluatori/30012018_Registru_angajatorilor.xlsx

In order to become member in the RNE, the experts are selected according to the *Methodology regarding registering of candidates for becoming ARACIS evaluators, constituting and actualization of the National Register of Evaluators (Metodologie privind înscrierea candidaților în vederea dobândirii calității de expert evaluator ARACIS, alcătuirea și actualizarea Registrului Național al Evaluatorilor ARACIS)*, that assures that all experts prove relevant **QA competences as a precondition** for becoming an ARACIS evaluator. ARACIS makes sure that the **selection of new experts**, as well as their **training** in what it regards the ARACIS methodologies and procedures, higher education regulations or European level

relevant documents are performed regularly and consistently. The two above mentioned activities are described below *in this order*, aiming to set the context for the clarification of the Review Report statements.

1.2 Selection of experts (external evaluators)

1.2.1 Academics

The procedure of becoming member of the National Register of Evaluators – RNE starts with an *ex-ante analysis of the application*, according to several eligibility criteria. The criteria are:

- a) *general* peer-review criteria (i.e. to be full or associate professor, to have had academic, managerial/administrative experience and experience in internal quality assurance);
- b) *specific* peer-review criteria, for the Permanent Speciality Commission of experts they are applying for (i.e. the domain/field, study program of teaching and research expertise compatible to the Commission associated domain).

Successful applicants should then pass a *test of their knowledge of ESG and ARACIS legislative framework and procedures*, that is performed in two successive steps, using a dedicated electronic platform (pfe.aracis.ro).

The selection procedure is presented schematically in **Annex 1.1**.

1.2.2 Students

In accordance with the ESG, students actively participate to Council debates and to the evaluation and decision-making processes, of an equal manner as other categories of experts. Students participate as full members of the Permanent (standing) Specialty Commissions of the agency and are involved as panel members in the evaluation of study programs and higher education institutions.

As it is mentioned in the ARACIS Self Assessment Report (SAR), p. 20, http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_SAR_November_2017_Final.pdf “*Students evaluators*, representing the main Students’ Federations (Unions) active in Romania with a legal status, namely National Alliance of Student Organizations of Romania (ANOSR), National Union of Students of Romania (UNSR), Union of Students of Romania (USR). Students are registered in the National Register of Evaluators - Students.” http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Registru_Evaluatori/Total_RNE_S_ian_2019.xls.

The application procedure is including a *training sessions* dedicated to new *student applicants* for registration in the RNE-S, followed by an evaluation, only successful candidates being registered. Dissemination of activities related to training and selection of students is realized by the students’ federations, with proper support from ARACIS, including publication on the web-site.

The selection of students as members of RNE-S is performed by the student federations after the training sessions, by testing their knowledge in QA standards, criteria, performance indicators and ARACIS methodology and procedures, as well as ESG.

1.2.3 Representatives of employers

The applicant for becoming ARACIS expert should hold a university degree and is required to present a CV, proving his/ her professional experience as employer representative, along with active involvement with higher education and higher education institutions. Higher education institutions were invited by ARACIS to engage with their partners from their economic and social environment for stimulating applications to become ARACIS evaluator.

The Department of accreditation of the Council analyses each application and forwards to the Council its proposal for acceptance/rejection.



Consequently, they can be included in the RNE – section employers

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Registru_Evaluatori/30012018_Registru_angajatorilor.xlsx

and take part as panel members at evaluation of study programmes and/or institutions.

The ARACIS Council approves by vote and validates the results of the selection procedures for all categories of candidates, before they are registered in the corresponding sections of the RNE and become evaluators.

1.3 Training of experts (external evaluators) - simulation and practical exercise

Training sessions are organized periodically by ARACIS for its evaluators, namely **academics, students** and **representatives of employers**.

They are thematic and concentrate on the *Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference and the list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (further referred to as the *Methodology*) and Procedures by simulating real evaluation situations.

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/1_Prima_Pagina_web/2018/Methodology_2018_EN.pdf

The Review Report of the ENQA coordinated panel mentions on page 34 a significant number of training sessions organised by ARACIS, supported by projects co-financed by EU funds as well as from the agency own resources.

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_External_Review_Report_2018.pdf

An overview of the training sessions can be found in the ARACIS SAR, Annex 7.7 Training of academics and students evaluators covering data for 2013-2017.

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/Final_Annexes_ARACIS_SAR.rar

1.3.1 Academics

To evidence the importance given to *learning by simulation and practical exercise* in **Annex 1.2. a) and b)** are presented examples of the Programmes of training sessions for academic evaluators organised in Brasov (23-24 February 2017, 152 participants), Sibiu (16-17 March 2017, 100 participants) and Bucharest (November 2017, 120 participants). The sessions were centered on the practical activity of the Permanent Specialty Commissions, taking into consideration real cases. The presentations can be found at the following link: www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Publicatii_Aracis/2017/Sesiune_de_training_Brasov_1.rar

As it can be seen from the program, one third of the program is dedicated to hands-on sessions, while the presentations in the plenary address also practical aspects of evaluations.

The e-platform is a complementary facility to the face-to-face training sessions and not a substitute. The electronic e-learning platform was created to provide evaluators an on-line easy to access to courses on ARACIS procedures and evaluation sheets (forms), as well as with the results of internal analyses of the ARACIS Departments. The information is thus easily disseminated to the evaluators in RNE, in order to permanently keep them up-dated with the changes in the legislation and procedures. The knowledge of evaluators is tested and they receive a feed-back from the platform, which is sent to the Department of accreditation for analysis and validation of the effectiveness of the dissemination. The records of courses, attendance, as well as the results of testing are kept in electronic format, as per http://www.aracis.ro/info/platforme-web/Raport_privind_numarul_de_cursuri_realizate_pe_platforma_de_training_si_numarul_de_utilizatori_care_au_participat_la_aceste_cursuri_online (Export



din.platforma.aracis.ro) (Report on number of courses on the training platform and the number of online users).

An illustration of the e-learning platform and functioning is presented at the following link: www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Platforme_web/Print_screens_from_training_platform.rar.

The Council members who are responsible for the Commissions periodically analyse and debate with members of the Permanent Speciality Commission the practical aspects of the ARACIS Methodology and Guide. The meeting sessions of Permanent Speciality Commissions are generally organised monthly, depending of the number of evaluations assigned to each of them.

Representatives of the Executive Board of the agency discusses periodically, with the academics and students members of the Permanent Speciality Commission, the results and conclusions of the evaluations, as well as the up-dates of the methodologies, guides and procedures.

The up-coming training session with academic and student experts is scheduled on 14-15 February 2019 for the members of the Permanent Speciality Commissions (program attached in *Annex 1.2 c*). The main topic of this training is the revision of site-visit evaluation sheets and the reporting forms of Bachelor (1st Cycle, „licenta”) as approved by the Council, as well as evaluation of doctoral studies. The proportion of time in sessions dedicated to practical training is similar to the one presented above.

1.3.2 Students

Considering that students evaluators need to gain more knowledge related to academic processes and governance, as well as quality assurance processes and procedures, the *training sessions for students* start with a theoretical component, introducing legislation in higher education, and of course ARACIS Methodology, criteria, standards and performance indicators. The evaluation procedures are than the subject of *practical training*, on real cases, including exercise of evaluation on real Self Evaluation Reports of already evaluated institutions, which afterwards is compared with the conclusions of ARACIS panel. This represents a hands-on exercise that students appreciate, have asked for it and it is regularly part of the training program.

The logistic support and funding for the training sessions is provided by ARACIS. The contents of the training sessions are finalised in consultation with Council members and evaluators who act also as lectors/tutors to complement the activity of student lectors.

The training sessions are crucial also in what it concerns clearly stating the role of students in the external quality assurance evaluations, as equal members of evaluation panels and different decision structures, thus empowering them towards an adequate participation.

The training the face to face sessions for students are mentioned in the ARACIS SAR- *Annex 7.7* as follows: March 2015 (Bacău), April 2016 (Bucharest), October 2016 (Bucharest), November 2016 (Bacău) for a total number of 178 students.

In 2018 four training sessions for students have been organized, in March, July (two sessions) and September, with a total number of 157 student participants, registered in the National Register of Evaluators - Students (RNE-S). All trainings for students last for 3-4 days, with around 30% of the time dedicated to practical trainings.

The up-coming training session for new student-applicants to become evaluators is scheduled between 25 February – 1 March 2019. The session includes three simulated site visits at different higher education institutions in Bucharest, two state and one private, lasting 2 days, with visits sheets filled in by the students.

1.3.3 Representatives of the employers

The representatives of employers are generally invited to attend training sessions organised for academics. Special training sessions for specific standards for awarding EUR-ACE Label are offered as well, as that organised at University “Transilvania” Brasov in November 2016, in which ESGs and ARACIS standards were also presented.

1.4 Support information and evidence on student participation in panels and student centeredness (Background information)

1.4.1 Participation of students in evaluation and governance structures

According to legislation and Council decisions, students are represented in all structures involved in external quality assurance processes of the agency, *with an equal role and voting rights as the academic experts*.

The participation of student members in the QA structures is described in detail in the ARACIS Self Assessment Report (*SAR*), and it is regulated as follows:

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_SAR_No_vember_2017_Final.pdf

- a) Two student representatives are members of the ARACIS Council since the agency was established (2005). They are proposed by the three student federations and are validated by vote of the Council.
- b) The two students' representatives who are members of the ARACIS Council are invited on a permanent basis to attend the sessions of the Executive Bureau of the agency, that is the structure delegated by the Council to manage and administer the current activity of ARACIS.
- c) One student representative in each of the Council departments, namely *Accreditation* and *Quality Assurance*, since the agency was established; the decision to include students in the ARACIS Departments was taken in 2016; before 2016 students were invited at the meetings of the Departments, on a regular basis;
- d) One student representative in each of the 13 Permanent Speciality Commissions, selected from the RNE according to the approved procedure published at the web address http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Posturi_vacante/2017/Studenti/v2_Procedura_selectie_studenti_comisii_de_specialitate.pdf;
- e) One student representative in all the visit panels evaluating master study programmes and master study domains, one student representative in all the visit panels evaluating 1st Cycle (licenta/ bachelor) study programmes, since 2017, and two student representatives in the panels evaluating higher education institutions, since 2006;
- f) One student is member of the Commission of Ethics, which analyses and judges ethical aspects of appeals and complaints according to the *Code of Ethics and norms of professional conduct of ARACIS activities on quality assurance and evaluation in higher education* http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/2017/Code_of_ethics_and_rules_of_conduct_ARACIS_2017.pdf (EN);

The involvement of students in ARACIS activities is as per **operational procedure** P.O. 09 *Cooptarea și activitatea evaluatorilor studenți în comisiile de evaluare (Inclusion and activity of student evaluators in evaluation commissions)* that, among other things, specifies the



requirements of their active participation and the mandatory assistance from ARACIS Council members and staff.

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O._09_ARACIS-Cooptarea_evaluatorilor_studenti_in_Comisiile_de_evaluare.pdf

At page 5, section 8.1 is established that “*Students are members with full rights and their remuneration is the same as for the expert evaluators.*”

Therefore, *students are full members in all evaluation structures, with equal rights and duties, and the coverage of mission costs and remuneration is the same as for the other members of the corresponding structures (Council member, Permanent Speciality Commission, evaluation panels).*

The ENQA panel, in its Review Report, commented that “*some evaluation panels treated student members as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators in the review exercise...*” (Review Report, p. 35).

At page 7 of the Procedure mentioned above, it is stated as follows:

“The student evaluators, as panel members, are evaluating using own methods in correlation with ARACIS Methodology, criteria, standards and performance indicators, formulating proposals to enhance quality of education, administrative processes in the institution, from their perspective; the evaluation is finalized by a report that the students draft observing the time schedule and conditions established by ARACIS.”

In the *Guide for Quality evaluation activities for study programmes and for higher education institutions. Part III* – at pag. 10, the paragraph 4.2 *Students’ participation* is dedicated to the involvement of students in internal and external QA of the higher education institutions. [http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie - Proceduri/PART_III-EXTERNAL_EVALUATION_OF_ACADEMIC_QUALITY.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/PART_III-EXTERNAL_EVALUATION_OF_ACADEMIC_QUALITY.pdf)

In ARACIS procedures, the student members of the site-visit panels have separate meetings with students of the institution and draft their independent report. The Report of the visit panel and the report of the Department, as well as the final ARACIS report, include the findings and the opinions of the student evaluators. *Since 2006, there wasn’t any situation of unadequate implication of students in the panel activity for institutional evaluation that was submitted to the attention of ARACIS management.*

Therefore, extending the student participation to study domains and study programs, according to ESG 2015, was not a challenge for ARACIS, in the content of the joint activity of academics and students, but it required training of a larger number of students and academic evaluators, to span the wide diversity of academic domains and study programs.

The Register Committee is kindly asked to note that, as it is mentioned in ARACIS SAR (pag.8) “*Between 2014 and October 2017, ARACIS has carried out on a permanent basis a total number of **2.388 external quality evaluation activities**, which represent the core of its mission: 1.796 Bachelor study programs - “licență”; 518 Master study programs – “masterat”; 74 institutional evaluations. Detailed information regarding the evaluations carried out by ARACIS during 01.01.2014 - 30.10.2017 is presented in Annex 3 of the SAR.”* http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_SAR_November_2017_Final.pdf)

The Review Report of the panel is thus covering a period with a large number of external evaluations of study programs, master domains and higher education institutions, involving evaluators from different study domains, academics and students.



The Review Report does not provide information on how many situations were reported, in which the “evaluation panels treated student members as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators”.

We consider that, in fact, such situations are rather the very few exceptions than the common practice. In very few cases, compared to the total number of evaluations, student representatives in the Council informed the ARACIS management about dysfunctionalities in the dialogue between the panel members. No written complaint was submitted though.

The statement in the Review Report was surprising for the agency, since the few isolated situations that occurred seem to be looked as general. Such isolated situations were in fact discussed by the Council and measures were taken, such as approval of the Operational procedure mentioned above and its enforcement, resulting in the better understanding of the role of students in the quality assurance processes of the agency. The training sessions shall continue to address this aspect, for both new and experienced evaluators - academics, students and representatives of other stakeholders.

In autumn 2018 ARACIS revised and completed, to fill vacancies, the membership of the Permanent Speciality Commissions, organising a selection procedure based on eligibility criteria, analysis of CVs and interviews with candidates. One of central points of the selection process was focused on the understanding of candidates upon *students’ involvement in quality assurance activities*.

1.4.2 Student centeredness

In the Review Report (p. 35) of ARACIS it is mentioned that “*some evaluators were not attuned to the necessity for ‘student centeredness’ in higher education and what that required of tutors and of them as evaluators.*”

The concept of ‘student centeredness’ is the object of ESG 1.3 “Student centred learning, teaching and evaluation”. This concept, appearing as a distinct ESG, is not new to evaluators in its content, but rather in its phrasing. To clarify the ESG 2015, several training sessions for evaluators were organized after the ministerial conference in Yerevan, as per Annex 7.7. from SAR.

Student-centered learning, teaching and evaluation is explicitly included in the Methodology approved by Government Decision No.915/2017
http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/Cadrul_legislativ_ARACIS/Metodologia_2006_actualizata_2017.pdf (in RO);
http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/1_Prima_Pagina_web/2018/Methdology_2018_EN.pdf (in EN).

The Methodology includes specific standards and performance indicators on *Student-centered learning, teaching and evaluation* the evaluators must consider.

The performance indicator (IP.B2.1.4. - in RO) PI B2.1.4 *Student centered learning methods* includes explicitly and in detail the requirements of the educational process and the obligations of teaching staff, while the performance indicator (IP.B2.1.3. - in RO) PI B2.1.3 *Level of student satisfaction with regard to their professional and personal development provided by the higher education institution* provides the means to obtain direct information from students on one important aspect of educational efficiency.

ARACIS paid attention to the enforcement of student-centered learning, teaching and evaluation even before the Methodology was finalized. Consultation of evaluators during training sessions, was performed, by asking the participants to fill in a questionnaire on their perception of the concept. The results of one such consultation are published in ARACIS Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education vol. 6 no 1/ 2015, p. 25,
http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Revista_QAR/2015/QAR_1_2016_online.pdf.

The article shows that the core and procedures of this standard were already very much embedded in the current practice of academic evaluators – with few exceptions. The conclusion drawn then was that the new Methodology, that was at that time in preparation, would not introduce completely new practice but it should contribute to correcting some “traditional – not in the good sense!” approaches of educators/tutors in the teaching and evaluation processes.

1.5 Conclusions to training sessions for evaluators, student members involvement in evaluations and ‘student centeredness’ in higher education

Students’ participation in evaluations has a long tradition in ARACIS activity. Students are now full members in all evaluation structures, *with equal rights and duties*, and the coverage of mission costs and remuneration is the same as for the other members of the corresponding structures (Council member, Permanent Speciality Commission, evaluation panels).

The statement that students were treated “as supernumeraries”, from the Review Report, was surprising for the agency, since the *few isolated situations* that occurred seem to be looked as general. Such isolated situations were in fact discussed by the Council and the measures taken, such as approval of the Operational procedure mentioned above and its enforcement, resulted in the better understanding of the role of students in the quality assurance processes of the agency. The training sessions shall continue to address this aspect, for both new and experienced evaluators - academics, students and representatives of other stakeholders.

Regarding „*student centeredness*”, ARACIS has taken measures to better explain to the evaluators the concept of ESG 1.3 and its application. We underline that the external review of the agency took place in the „transition period” between the Methodology based on ESG 2005 and the Methodology based on ESG 2015. Now, *the concept of „student centeredness” is clearly stated as a standard, with its performance indicators*, to be applied consistently in both teaching process and external evaluation. In the coming training sessions for evaluators this issue will be paid a special attention.

2 ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

The Register Committee noted that ARACIS does not have a permanent appeals' commission but an ad hoc commission is established to deal with each new case by the Executive Board of ARACIS. The agency explained that the small number of appeals and complaints it has received to date does not justify moving to more permanent arrangements of handling complaints and appeals.

The Register Committee found that the *involvement of the Executive Board of the Council in the selection process of the members of the Appeals Committee might interfere with the integrity of the decision-making process* and has therefore asked the panel for further information on the criteria and selection procedure of the ad-hoc Appeals Committee members. *The panel noted in its response letter that it has no information on the criteria ARACIS follows when it constitutes ad hoc panels and that the panel was uneasy with the ad hoc approach.*

2.1 Support information and evidence on Complaints and Appeals (Background information)

ARACIS is making consistent efforts to build a constructive and transparent relationship with the higher education institutions regarding external evaluation and quality assurance.

Following the approval of the new ESG 2015 the agency has revised its procedures to address all categories of Complaints and Appeals. The *Guide* includes main provisions, that are detailed and revised by the *System* and *Operational* procedures.

[http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie - Proceduri/PART III-EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC QUALITY.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/PART_III-EXTERNAL_EVALUATION_OF_ACADEMIC_QUALITY.pdf)

ARACIS addresses **Complaints** and **Appeals** based on distinct, separate procedures. The synthetic presentation on the *complaints* and *appeals* solving procedures was published on the website as *Precizari suplimentare privind aplicarea procedurilor de solutionare a reclamatilor si contestatiilor (Additional clarifications on application of procedures for addressing complaints and appeals)*, integrating the main information from the two procedures. http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/Precizari_suplimentare_privind_procedurile_de_contestatii_si_reclamatii.pdf (RO) and in **Annex 2.2.** in EN.

The procedure of solving **Complaints** (in Romanian: „Petitii/Reclamatii”) is a System procedure – Code P.S.03 – ARACIS *Solution of complaints* („Solutionarea petitiilor”) that has been re-drafted and approved in 2017 and revised again for more clarity http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/PS._03_ARACIS_-_Solutionarea_petitiilor.pdf.

Regarding the nature of **Complaints**, indicated also in ”*Precizari suplimentare privind aplicarea procedurilor de solutionare a reclamatilor si contestatiilor*” (*Additional clarifications on application of procedures for addressing complaints and appeals*), these could be:

- a) incompatibility of expert evaluators;
- b) conflict of interests of expert evaluators;
- c) deviations from the provisions of the *Code of Ethics and norms of professional conduct of ARACIS activities on quality assurance and evaluation in higher education* http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/2017/Code_of_ethics_and_rules_of_conduct_ARACIS_2017.pdf (EN).



ARACIS has received a very small number of *Complaints* – in fact one single written complaint over the whole period under scrutiny 2014 – 2017. This situation might be considered as a proof that the external evaluation procedures of ARACIS have been consistently followed during the years, thus contributing to the keeping up of the confidence in the outcomes of evaluations performed and to the prestige of the agency with higher education institutions in Romania.

The procedure of solving *Appeals* (in Romanian: „Contestatii”) is an Operational procedure - Code P.O.10 – ARACIS *Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions* („Solutionarea contestatiilor depuse de institutiile de invatamant superior”)

[http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O. 10 ARACIS - Solutionarea contestatiilor depuse de institutiile de invatamant superior.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O._10_ARACIS_-_Solutionarea_contestatiilor_depuse_de_institutiile_de_invatamant_superior.pdf).

Regarding the nature of *Appeals*, these could be:

- a) procedural failings in the evaluation process;
- b) the *judgment* and *advise* awarded following the external evaluation of study programmes, study domains or institutional.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that outcomes of the external evaluation activity, written down in the visit sheet, are commonly agreed with the universities representatives, who are endorsing and signing the document.

The number of APPEALS for study programs and institutional evaluations was also very small. Thus, 46 appeals were received following external evaluation of a total of 1796 Bachelor Study Programs (SPs), 518 Master SPs and 74 Higher Education Institutions, as per **Annex 4** in the ARACIS SAR.

(http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/Final_Annexes_ARACIS_SAR.rar).

The number of appeals represents 1.93% of the total of 2388 external evaluations performed by ARACIS; 16 appeals were accepted.

2.2 The rationale and criteria ARACIS follows when it constitutes ad hoc panels (“commissions”, “committees”) for addressing APPEALS

Submission of *Appeals* leads to the nomination of an appeals commissions.

The *appeals commission* includes:

- a) one member of the *Consultative commission* <http://www.aracis.ro/organizare/structura-aracis/consiliul-aracis/>,
- b) one *external evaluator* from the *National Register of Evaluators – RNE*;
- c) one *Inspector from the Quality Assurance Direction*,

if the Appeal refers to an institutional judgement.

Nomination of *Appeals* commissions as per individual missions („ad hoc approach”, as per the review panel terminology) follows the Operational procedure P.O.10 – ARACIS *Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions* („Solutionarea contestatiilor depuse de institutiile de invatamant superior”) and it is meant to *avoid conflicts of interests* as well as *any possibility to influence decisions*.

[http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O. 10 ARACIS - Solutionarea contestatiilor depuse de institutiile de invatamant superior.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O._10_ARACIS_-_Solutionarea_contestatiilor_depuse_de_institutiile_de_invatamant_superior.pdf).

This approach was chosen against the possibility to nominate one single permanent *Appeals* commission for the following reasons:



- a. The first criterion used by the Executive Board is to avoid nomination of commission members who are /were connected professionally or by any other relationship (family etc.) with the higher education institution that filled in the appeal. In case of permanent membership of the appeals commission conflicts of interests would be more difficult to be identified; in case there is a conflict of interests with one or more commission member(s) would be identified, they would need to be replaced anyway by decision of the Executive Board/Council. The second criterion used is not to nominate as commission members those evaluators having been involved in the evaluation which is the subject of the appeal. The third criterion is to avoid external evaluators from Higher education institutions that might be in „competitive situation (i.e. for enrolling students from the same town or region)” with the appellant institution.
- b. In case of evaluation of study programmes, the criteria mentioned above are used as well. In addition, it should be stated an important „technical argument”: a single permanent APPEALS commission, reasonably sized in terms of the number of its members, would not have the professional competence to address adequately the large diversity of study programmes and master study domains: according to the Government Decision 692/2018 <http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Nr crt 0050 HG 692-2018.docx>, in force, in the academic year 2018 – 2019, the 102 Romanian higher education institutions offer 3581 Bachelor Study Programmes (SPs) and 3080 Master Study Programmes <http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Nr crt 0026 HG 691-2018.pdf>.
- c. The inclusion of one member of the ARACIS Consultative commission (without voting rights) in the visit panels (commissions) for each institutional evaluation is part of the internal quality assurance measures taken by the agency to minimize any occurrence of ethical or procedural failure. The criteria for inclusion are the same as the ones described above.

The activity of the *Appeals* commissions for study programmes is quantified and the results are made public in detail in final Council Reports that ARACIS publishes. To sustain this statement by evidence, the **Annex 2.1** includes one example (original document partially translated into English) of the procedure and outcome of addressing the complaint for the study programme *Public Administration*. The full text can be found (in Romanian) included in the final Council Report for the external evaluation of „Avram Iancu” Educational Association from Cluj-Napoca, published on the ARACIS web page:

http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Contestatie_Administratie_publica_29_03.2018.pdf (ro).

The procedures for addressing appeals and complaints were followed consistently and improved during the years. In the Comparative analysis of judgments of previous ENQA coordinated reviews (2009, 2013), as per Annex 9.3 of ARACIS SAR, for ESG 2.7 in 2018 the judgment was Fully compliant. In both 2009 and 2013 reviews for former ENQA criterion 8, which included Consistency of judgments and appeals system, the judgment was Fully compliant: (http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/Final_Annexes_ARACIS_SAR.rar)

In that respect, the decision of the Register Committee to downgrade to Partial compliance the judgment of the Review Panel for ESG 2.7 was quite surprising, but nevertheless a triggering point to take further action to continue to implement provisions of the standard in a more clear way and to improve procedures. Consequently, the internal procedure for addressing appeals is now revisited and published not only internally (as mentioned in Annex 4 of the SAR http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/Final_Annexes_ARACIS_SAR.rar) but also on the webpage:

[http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O. 10_ARACIS - Solutionarea contestatiilor depuse de institutiile de invatamant superior.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/P.O. 10_ARACIS_-_Solutionarea_contestatiilor_depuse_de_institutiile_de_invatamant_superior.pdf).



The ENQA panel did not ask, during the visit, for a translation of the document mentioned in Annex 4 of the SAR. This could explain the lack of more detailed information in the ENQA Review Report.

2.3 Conclusions on Appeals procedures

Following the recommendations of the Review report (p. 44), ARACIS decided to publish on the web site the *Operational procedure Code P.O.10 – ARACIS Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions*. Also, a separate synthetic document was posted on the website - *Additional clarifications on application of procedures for addressing complaints and appeals (Precizari suplimentare privind aplicarea procedurilor de solutionare a reclamatilor si contestatiilor)*.

As the *Executive Board of the Council is delegated the responsibility to manage the activity of the agency*, its involvement in the selection process of the members of the Appeals Commissions (“Committees”) is, as explained before, *based on strictly defined and consistently followed criteria and does not interfere with the integrity of the decision*.

3 ESG 3.1 Activities, policy, and processes for quality assurance

The Register Committee noted the review panel's concerns with the internal arrangements of the agency and has therefore asked the panel to clarify in what way have these arrangements affected ARACIS' operations. In its response letter, the panel stated that its concerns referred to the oversight of ARACIS' operations rather than the operations themselves i.e. in particular how the Council ensured an effective "oversight" of the agency's work considering that the Executive Board was intimately involved in managing and overseeing these operations.

The Committee could not follow the panel's concerns since the organisational arrangements did not seem to affect the agency's operations.

With regards to the agency's vision mission and strategy, the panel stated that ARACIS *"does not have a strategic plan that spans several years and does not appear to set targets for itself against which its Council and others can measure the Agency's performance"* (Review report p. 17).

Considering the involvement of stakeholders, *the Register Committee noted that this is limited to representatives of students and employers sitting in ARACIS Council and Permanent Specialty Commissions. In the view of the panel ARACIS tended to define the terms of 'stakeholder' narrowly, confining it to students, employers and trades union representatives and the panel was not confident that ARACIS understands the need to involve stakeholders more fully in the work of the Council and the work of ARACIS.*

3.1 Support information and evidence on agency's vision, mission and strategy (Background information)

Since its establishment in 2005, the strategy of ARACIS was correlated with its mission of contributing to the quality enhancement of education and research in higher education, to stimulate public responsibility of higher education for the society. In this context, the agency has drafted and implemented a significant number of projects of national interest on quality assurance in the European context, financed from European and Governmental funds.

The objectives of those projects (<http://www.aracis.ro/proiecte/>) are aligned with the national strategies in higher education which are correlated with the strategy of the EHEA. One main objective was the development of a quality culture in Romanian higher education, based on universally recognised values, such as responsibility, integrity, expertise, collaboration and innovation. In this context, in projects such as ACADEMIS, QUALITAS, ACADINOV, TARGET and QAFIN, ARACIS has succeeded to align its own strategy with the national one and to contribute significantly to the quality enhancement of higher education and to involve more and more stakeholders in its work.

As the projects are constructed around general and specific objectives, implemented through activities clearly described within a timeframe, the functioning of the agency wasn't affected by the lack of a formal established strategy and action plan.

At the moment of the site-visit of the ENQA panel, in the ARACIS SAR http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_SAR_November_2017_Final.pdf, p.60, a section was dedicated to *Current challenges and areas for future development/assumed deadlines*. Starting from this plan, which is a result of a SWOT



analysis, ARACIS took note of the recommendations in the ENQA Review report (p. 18) and developed a Strategic plan for the period 2018-2021, approved by the Council and made public on the agency web page:

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/1_Prima_Pagina_web/2019/Strategy_of_the_Romanian_Agency_for_Quality_Assurance_in_Higher_Education_2018-2021.pdf.

This plan includes four strategic areas with 14 strategic objectives.

The Strategic plan, spanning several years, is the basis of operational plans, drafted and approved for 2018 and 2019:

(http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/1_Prima_Pagina_web/2019/ARACIS_Operational_Plan_for_2019.pdf).

The analyses of achievement of the yearly objectives shall be published on the webpage in the Annual Activity Reports, in order to allow the Ministry of National Education, National Rectors' Council, universities and stakeholders to analyse ARACIS priorities, activity and performances. (<http://www.aracis.ro/publicatii/publicatii-aracis/>).

3.2 Support information and evidence on the involvement of stakeholders in ARACIS work (Background information)

In the ENQA panel Review Report it is stated that “*the panel was not confident that ARACIS understands the need to involve stakeholders more fully in the work of the Council and the work of ARACIS*”.

Starting from the recommendations of the 2013 ENQA coordinated review of the agency, ARACIS extended the concept of stakeholder to teaching staff, students, university administrators/managers from HEIs, directors of the internal quality assurance structures in universities, representatives of public institutions, members of the National Rectors' Council, members of the National Agency for Qualifications, representatives of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education (ARACIP), leaders of employers organisations and teachers unions, aiming to imply them more actively in the evaluation processes and governance of the agency.

Based on a special own methodology, ARACIS established in 2014, the „Employers' commission” which was supposed to work similarly to the Permanent Speciality Commissions. From objective but also bureaucratic reasons, originating from other national legislation, this commission did not function as expected. Consequently, the tasks of the Employers' commission were taken over by the members of the Register of Employers, who are selected as members of external evaluation panels and included, after a selection procedure, in the operational structures of the agency.

Presently, representatives of stakeholders are included in all ARACIS structures which are involved in quality assurance processes, as described below (see also **Annex 3.1**):

- a) The *ARACIS Council* is the leading body of the agency. After the previous ENQA coordinated review of the agency, in 2013, the *Law* has been further modified. At present, the ARACIS Council has 21 members, as follows: *17 academics; two students, representatives of the Romanian Students Federations (Unions); one representative of the employers' federations, one representative of the trade-union with the highest number of members in higher education*. According to the Law, the composition of the Council is renewed periodically.
- b) The two *ARACIS Departments*, of Accreditation and of Quality evaluation, include each *8 academics, one student, one representative of employers* or of teaching *trade-unions* – members of the Council;



- c) While the composition of the Executive Bureau of the Council is regulated by Law (President, Vice-president, Secretary General, 2 Directors of Departments the Executive Bureau invites on a permanent basis at its meetings the two Council members *students* and the Council member representing teachers' *trade-unions*.
([http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie -
Proceduri/Cadrul legislativ ARACIS/OUG 75-2005 aprobata prin Legea 87-2006 actualizata 2018.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/Cadrul_legislativ_ARACIS/OUG_75-2005_aprobata_prin_Legea_87-2006_actualizata_2018.pdf))
- d) The *Permanent Speciality Commissions* include *9 academics* and one *student* representative, all nominated according to selection procedures and validated by the Council.
- e) The *commissions (panels) nominated for external evaluation of study programmes/master study domains* include 2-4 academics (one is member of the Permanent Speciality Commission, acting as coordinator of the panel) and one *student* evaluator nominated by the students' federations. For institutional evaluations the commissions include *a larger number of academics* (depending on the number of study programmes evaluated as part of the institutional evaluation), *two student* evaluators and *one international expert evaluator*.
- f) The *commissions (panels) nominated for external evaluation of 1st Cycle engineering study programmes* requiring the EU- ACE Label include, along with the other *academic members* and the *student, two representatives of employers* selected from the ARACIS Register of Employers according to the study domain.
- g) The *Commission of Ethics* has five permanent members: *3 academics* form the Council, one *student* and one *representative of the teachers' trade-unions*.
- h) The *international Commission for selection by competition of new Council members* included 4 Council members, who continue their mandate, *one representative of employers, one representative of ENQA* and *one student representative of ESU*.

According to its strategic commitment to enhance transparency and efficiency of external evaluations, ARACIS *consulted with stakeholders* - representatives of universities, the National Rectors Council, the National Agency for Qualifications regarding the proposals for the new Methodology, Guide and specific standards. Consultations were organised periodically in different university centers in the country, over a two years period after the new ESG were approved. For instance, the final versions approved of the procedures and Guide for periodic evaluation of master studies domains are the result of this consultation process.
[http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie -
Proceduri/2017/Guideline for periodic external evaluation of the fields of study for the Master degrees.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/2017/Guideline_for_periodic_external_evaluation_of_the_fields_of_study_for_the_Master_degrees.pdf)

At this moment, ARACIS is going to proceed to the external evaluation of doctoral studies. The Methodology and Guide *have been discussed with the stakeholders*, namely representatives of universities, the Ministry of National Education, the National Rectors Council (CNR) in the last year and a half. Presentations and debates on the standards for external evaluations took place at National Rectors Council sessions: 7-8 October 2016 - CNR Târgu Mureș, 14 November 2016 – CNR București, 9 February 2017 – CNR București, 15 March 2017 – CNR, ASE București, 30-31 March 2017 – CNR Brașov, 7-8 October 2017 – CNR Craiova, 16-18 November 2017 - CNR Iași, 2-3 February 2018 - CNR Brașov. The presentations realised by ARACIS representatives are posted on the website for the stakeholders and the general public at: <http://www.aracis.ro/publicatii/publicatii-aracis/>

The ARACIS Council has approved the inclusion of representatives of employers in the permanent Specialty Commissions, with priority the Commission of Engineering Sciences, that



analyse also evaluations aiming the awarding of EUR-ACE Label. The selection of procedures will be initiated soon.

The flow-chart of the external evaluation process for 1st cycle („licenta” – Bachelor) and 2nd cycle (“masterat” – Master) university study programmes and institutional evaluations, as well as the structures which validate the results, is given also in *Annex 3.1.* in which participation of stakeholders is evidenced.

According to the law, the ARACIS Council members have periodic meetings with the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university education (ARACIP) to promote compatible concepts for evaluation of schools and universities aiming at better orientation of high-school graduates in choosing their higher education study fields.

Moreover, during site-visits, ARACIS evaluators have meetings and discussions with all the “internal stakeholders” – academics, students, administrators involved in internal quality assurance. They are meeting also representatives of employers (public and private), professional associations, graduates working in different professional fields or doctoral students. For study programmes, ARACIS evaluators analyse the structure of curricula and content of syllabi, insisting on the need to involve in their development and approval not only the teaching staff but *other stakeholders, precisely students and representatives of employers and professional associations.*

The training sessions organised for ARACIS evaluators under the project QUALITAS involved an important category of stakeholders, namely “internal evaluators” from HE institutions – persons involved in the Internal Quality Assurance structures.

However, ARACIS has considered the observations in the 2018 ENQA Review Report on the need to extend stakeholder involvement in its quality assurance procedures. Therefore, the agency decided to become partner of the Ministry of National Education in the project proposal *SEQA (Stakeholders engagement in QA)*. The application was submitted to the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency – EACEA of the EU, under Erasmus+ - KA3 – Support to Policy Reform, invitation to submit: EACEA/35/2018 "Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms - 2018-2020", STRAND 1: Support to the activities related to the Bologna Peer Groups call (submission number 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3-BOLGNA).

The consortium led by the Romanian Ministry of National Education, as national authority, includes 3 European organizations representing QAA (ENQA), universities (EURASHE) and students (ESU) and 5 quality assurance agencies, from Romania, France, Bulgaria, Denmark and R. of Moldova. The project is promoting the diversification of stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance activities across EHEA, but will also provide the means for making the involvement of stakeholders effective. It is expected to bring important changes in the practices of quality assurance agencies related to stakeholders' involvement, which on long term will result in increased relevance and impact of quality assurance activities in higher education.

The participation to the project, as well as the involvement of ARACIS in the works of the BFUG Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance would help the agency to benefit from the experience of other EHEA countries agencies, one of the sub-themes that are tackled by the group being *stakeholders' involvement in internal and external quality assurance.*

ARACIS is also partner in a project proposal coordinated by the Ministry of National Education with the theme *Internationalisation of the higher education system in Romania by adaptation and implementation of international standards and European regulations and strengthening the connexion with labour market.* The other project partners are the National Agency for Qualifications (ANC) and the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI) of the Ministry of National Education.



The general objective of the project is *connection of the higher education system in Romania to international standards and European recommendations regarding qualifications, learning outcomes and strengthening the relationship with the labour market*. The application for the project is under evaluation with the Human Capital Operational Programme, financed from structural funds.

We mention that **the conclusions of the 2009 and 2013 ENQA coordinated reviews of the agency were:**

- a) ESG 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures in higher education and 3.3 Activities: Fully compliant;
- b) ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies: Substantially compliant in 2009; Fully compliant in 2013.

3.3 Conclusion on agency's vision, mission and strategy and on the involvement of stakeholders in ARACIS activities

ARACIS developed a Strategic plan for the period 2018-2021, approved by the Council and made public on the agency web page:

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/1_Prima_Pagina_web/2019/Strategy_of_the_Romanian_Agency_for_Quality_Assurance_in_Higher_Education_2018-2021.pdf.

This plan includes four strategic areas with 14 strategic objectives.

The Strategic plan, spanning over several years, is the basis of operational plans, drafted and approved for 2018 and 2019. The results of achievement of the yearly objectives will be published on the webpage in the Annual Activity Reports, to allow the Ministry of National Education, National Rectors' Council, universities and stakeholders to analyse ARACIS priorities, activity and performances: (<http://www.aracis.ro/publicatii/publicatii-aracis/>).

We noted that in the EQAR letter to ARACIS it is stated „*With a view to the application of Quality Barometers, the panel stated that they are used by ARACIS to engage with quality professionals, academics, students, and others throughout Romania and to disseminate aspects related to higher education to interested parties. In light of the panel's clarification the Register Committee concurred with the panel's conclusion that ARACIS complies with ESG 3.4.*” We are confident that this conclusion of the Register Committee is important also for its judgment of compliance with ESG 3.1 at this aspect, namely *involvement of stakeholders in ARACIS activity*.

The progress with respect to the previous ENQA coordinated reviews can be summarized as follows:

- a. after the two student representatives were included in April 2011 as full members of the Council, the Law was amended at the request of ARACIS to include the representatives of the employers' confederations and of the trade-unions in education as members of the Council (it was mentioned in the 2017 ARACIS SAR (http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_SAR_November_2017_Final.pdf, p. 19);
- b. consultation of stakeholders has become common practice in the elaboration of quality assurance regulations;
- c. stakeholders became more involved in learning-outcomes based curricula and syllabi at universities level, this aspect being evaluated by ARACIS according to the new Methodology;
- d. representatives of employers' stakeholders are included in a dedicated section of the National register of evaluators – RNE and participate at training sessions;



- e. ARACIS has taken action to be active in European projects (i.e. SEQA project proposal to EACEA) on stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance in higher education.

4 ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

In the analysis of the review report, the panel noted an improvement in the agency's internal quality assurance process and encouraged ARACIS to continue with its work to introduce IQA, seeking ways to express its quality assurance expectations for its evaluation and other academic based activities.

The panel also stressed *the need for ARACIS's internal QA to be improved so as to support the work of its specialty commissions*, responsible for the consistency check of evaluation reports and for preparing the Council's decisions. *The panel found that the members of Permanent Specialty Commission do not have access to the searchable digital copies of evaluation reports, and that they are provided with a pile of reports the day before the meeting, thus being prevented in making their own judgements on the findings of individual reports.*

While the panel stated that ARACIS newly introduced comprehensive IQA procedures and new staff member will provide the agency with a sound basis for reviewing and improving the effectiveness with which it works, *the Register Committee found this is not yet been fully implemented, in particular in supporting the internal activity of its specialty commissions.*

4.1 Support information and evidence on the need for ARACIS's internal QA to be improved so as to support the work of its Permanent specialty commissions (Background information)

The ENQA coordinated Review Report p. 23, mentions the progress of ARACIS in developing and formalizing internal quality assurance procedures, underlying the fact that the observations of the previous 2013 evaluation are fully addressed:

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_External_Review_Report_2018.pdf,

The *Code of Ethics and norms of professional conduct of ARACIS activities on quality assurance and evaluation in higher education* follows the requirements of the previous evaluation:

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_Proceduri/2017/Code_of_ethics_and_rules_of_conduct_ARACIS_2017.pdf (EN)

When the site-visit took place the number of formalized procedures was 30, drafted in accordance with both ESG 2015 in content and national legislation in the structure. The procedures are part of the Quality manual and are published on the intranet webpage of the agency. As it is shown in the Introduction, the procedures are, according to Romanian legislation, of two types: *System procedures* (PS – Procedura de sistem) and *Operational procedures* (PO – Procedura operatională).

At present, *38 internal quality assurance procedures* are finalized, addressing definition, assurance and enhancement of all the current activities of the agency. ARACIS is well aware that IQA system should be permanently revised and improved, aiming to assure the stakeholders that the agency works according to their expectations of quality ethical conduct and integrity.

According to the Romanian legislation, as all public institutions, the IQA system of ARACIS is periodically monitored externally by the specialised audit agency of the state. The Reports of this agency were favourable to ARACIS. We mention, however, that the need to hire additional staff could not be met, since no candidate has applied for the job following the public announces for hiring, until 2017; during 2018, all public institutions were temporarily forbidden to hire new personnel. Now, this interdiction has been lifted and therefore the agency started the



procedure to fill in the two open positions from the Organisation Chart, at the Internal public audit department, as per Fig. 4 presented in ARACIS SAR

(http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Capacitatea_Institutionala/2018/ARACIS_SAR_No_vember_2017_Final.pdf, p.6.

4.2 Internal quality Assurance progress

Internal quality assurance is addressed as per Operational Procedure P.O. 25 – ARACIS, that is based on ESG 2015

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Informatii_publice/Organigrama/PO-25-ARACIS-_Asigurare_interna_a_calitatii.pdf.

At page 8, section 8.4.2. is established that “*The policies and procedures of internal QA control are including discussions with coordinators of evaluations of main aspects and of all the problems occurring during evaluations or overviews of some evaluation reports and analysis of conclusions.*” These activities are contributing to the consistency of evaluations results.

4.3 Support to the work of Permanent Speciality Commissions

ARACIS considered the recommendation of the ENQA Review panel to support the work of the Permanent Specialty Commissions, to enable them to take coherent decisions based on analyses of all documents of external evaluations of study programmes.

According to the internal Operational Procedure P.O.11 - ARACIS, for *Monitoring the activity of Permanent Speciality Commissions (Monitorizarea activității comisiilor de experți permanenți de specialitate)* the experts and speciality inspectors for accreditation and quality assurance (permanent staff of the agency) provides all the logistic and material support to the Permanent Speciality Commissions, in organising site-visits, as well as providing the documents needed for the evaluation, organising meetings of the commissions for analysis and proposals for judgments, drafting the reports of the Permanent Speciality Commissions for validation in the Council.

To access documentation on previous external evaluations and the recommendations, the experts can find this information on the ARACIS website (<http://www.aracis.ro/rezultate-evaluari/evaluari-ale-programelor-de-studii/>), *that is searchable* using keywords. During the site-visit the evaluators can seek support and additional information from the speciality inspectors.

After *the site-visit is completed, the President (coordinator) of the site-visit panel, who is member of the Permanent Speciality Commission, provides the Speciality inspector with the documents drafted by the visit panel, according to the Executive Board Decision No. 15/2018 (Annex 4.1). The speciality inspector forwards by e-mail all the documents to the members of the Permanent Speciality Commission, well prior to the date of the session (meeting) when the results of the evaluation are to be analysed. Based on these documents and presentation in the plenary session* of this Commission by the panel coordinator, the proposal of the Permanent Speciality Commission for a judgment is proposed and voted. At the session (meeting) of the Permanent Speciality Commission, the members analyse the results of the evaluations for each study programme/master study domain and decide by secret vote the judgment and proposal, drafting a report which is presented in the Council or the Department of accreditation for further discussion (only in cases of *No-confidence or Limited confidence* judgments). During the session (meeting), the Commission is given support by the Speciality inspector, who must be present at the meeting. The inspector takes the Report of the *Permanent Speciality Commission*



and/or the *Report of the Department of accreditation* (if this is the case), to be analysed in the Council meeting.

One member of the ARACIS Council, in charge of the Commission, attends as invitee with no voting rights, the session (meeting) of the Permanent Speciality Commission. His/her role is to contribute by a consultative opinion to the solution of possible problems raised by the interpretation of procedures and documents, to assure consistency between the practices of different Commissions, to brief the members of the Commission on the recent Council decisions (if it is the case) and to transmit directly and rapidly to the Council possible problems linked to the study programmes evaluation procedure or possible disfunctions in the work of the commission, if any. The result of the vote and the documents are forwarded for validation to the Council for approval. In some cases, for non-confidence or limited confidence Permanent Speciality Commission proposals, the proposal is analysed in one of the two Departments of the Council, before of being sent to the Council for approval.

After the Report of the *Permanent Speciality Commission* is drafted, the speciality inspector sends to the university a feed-back questionnaire asking its opinion on the visit and behaviour of evaluators. The results of the feed-back are presented in the Council together with the Report.

The Reports of the *Permanent Speciality Commission* on Study programmes are presented and defended in the Council by the presidents of Commissions. The *Report of the Department of accreditation* is presented and defended in the Council by the director of the Department.

4.4 Conclusions on internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The *Permanent Speciality Commissions* are supported in their work by ARACIS procedures and competent professional staff.

Before their meeting, the Permanent Specialty Commission have access to the searchable digital copies of evaluation reports for all evaluations, for comparison, and, following the site visit, each member of the Permanent Speciality Commission receives by e-mail, for analysis, the documents drafted by the visit panel.



LIST OF ANNEXES

Annex 1.1 - Registration as ARACIS evaluator in RNE

Annex 1.2 a - Programme of periodic training of new ARACIS evaluators (23 – 24.02.2017)

Annex 1.2 b - Programme of periodic training of new ARACIS evaluators (16 – 17.03.2017)

Annex 1.2 c - Programme of training session for Permanent Speciality Commissions (14-15 February 2019)

Annex 2.1 The Report of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Evaluation type provisional authorisation – *Appeal*. Licence study programme: Public Administration. Licence domain – Administrative Sciences.

Annex 2.2 Additional clarifications on application of procedures for addressing complaints and appeals of higher education institutions

Annex 3.1 Flow chart of the Procedure for external evaluation for provisional authorization (AP)/accreditation (A)/periodic evaluation (EVP) of 1st Cycle Study Programmes and Master Studies Domains

Annex 4.1 Decision of the Executive Board No. 15/2018