SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

(SER)

of

ARACIS

For renewal of Full Membership with ENQA

(European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)

and

For renewal of ARACIS listing within the

EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education)

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This Application is organized in accordance to Parts 2 and 3 of the European Guidelines for external Reviews of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area - ESG.

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Based on the letter dated 5155/30.08.2012, ARACIS submitted its application for assessment of the compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), in view of renewal of Full Membership with ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and also for renewal of ARACIS listing within the EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education).

1. General presentation of ARACIS

1.1 Status

The introductory part of the general presentation continues and extends the one included in the Self Evaluation Report submitted to ENQA in 30.08.2012 as part of the application for full membership. This option is supported by the fact that the changes in Romanian legislation and of some other subsequent secondary regulations aiming to improve the independence of the agency and to extend the representation in the ARACIS Council of study domains did not alter the basic concepts, procedures, standards and performance indicators used in the quality assurance exercise.

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is known by the Romanian acronym ARACIS which stands for „*Agenția Română pentru Asigurarea Calității în Învățământul Superior*", referred to thereafter as **ARACIS / the Agency**. The Agency started to function in 2005, being instituted by the legal provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education, referred to thereafter as the Ordinance. In 2006 some provisions of the Ordinance were modified by the Parliament, the Ordinance was adopted by the Parliament and became the Law nr. 87/2006,. The Law provides the framework regarding quality assurance in education as a whole, while also referring specifically to quality assurance and to the concept of accreditation in Romanian education and, specifically, in higher education. The Ordinance and then the Law were drafted and approved in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Bergen, 2005) adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education from the Bologna countries. The provisions of the Law either include specifically or implicitly comply with the principles and standards which are currently applied in European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In what follows, references to the existing provisions of the Law and to their roots are made in order to outline some contextual legal current and historical dimensions of the current activities of ARACIS. An important modification of the legislation was the fact that ARACIS' independence was strengthened by the new provisions (**Law amending Emergency Government Ordinance no. 75/2005 on providing quality education – April, 2011 – Annex 1**) that the Agency is now empowered to better match its number of permanent staff positions to its evolving working demand and to include two student representatives as full members of the Council (initially, until April 2011 the two students had observer status).

ARACIS is ENQA full member since June 2009

In 2011 ARACIS sent to ENQA the Progress Report in which it was shown how the observations and recommendations following the 2009 ENQA co-ordinated review of the agency were addressed by ARACIS. The Progress Report was accepted by the ENQA Board without further observations (see Annex 2 – Progress Report and Annex 3 – ENQA Board letter to ARACIS).

ARACIS is listed in the EQAR since September 2009

1.2 Terminology

ARACIS's mission is, according to the law, to asses the quality of the study programmes, study domains and Higher Education Institutions as well as to contribute, together with the HEIs, to quality enhancement. This is done via a process of evaluation, which starts with a review of the way in which the reqirements of pre-determined and published quality standards and performance indicators are met.

The terminology used in this SER was chosen, for clarity, according to the specificity of the Romanian language. Thus, in English terms such as audit, review, assessment or evaluation have not always the same connotation and are translated with difficulty into Romanian. Since they are usually translated from English into Romanian by the Romanian word "*evaluare*" (in English: "evaluation") we use in drafting the ARACIS procedures (in Romanian) the word "*evaluare*", as a more complex process, to be differentiated of „control". Therefore, to avoid any possible confusion, in the English versions of our documents (including this SER) the word "evaluation" was kept as a general concept to cover all the others ones which could be considered somewhat equivalent, as they are defined also in the ESG.

The evaluation procedure is finalized by a report, a "quality judgment" (i.e. „High Degree of Confidence" etc.) and by follow-up procedures. The Report includes a proposal to the Ministry of National Education which shall empower it with legal consequences (i.e.: „accreditation" or „maintaining the accreditation" etc.).

1.3 Activity

Since 2005 ARACIS has carried out the following external quality evaluation activities, which are current and permanent:
- evaluation of first cycle study programs (Licenţă – in English: equivalent of Bachelor) - (Day course, Part-time course and Distance learning) seeking accreditation (or, according to the case, provisional authorizing as first step of accreditation); - evaluation of second cycle (Master) study programs - (Day course and Distance learning) seeking accreditation - (Day course and Distance learning);
- periodical evaluation of accredited study programs – first cycle (Licenta); - external evaluation of higher education institutions (periodical or in view of accreditation);
- system-wide analyses (since 2009);
- co-operation with universities and counseling;
- co-operation with the National Authority for Qualifications;

Other activity include:
- drafting proposals for adapting Methodolgies to requirements of the Law of national education
- 2011 (work in progress);
- coordination and running of national projects in quality assurance, including projects selected for funding from European Structural Funds (since 2008);
- participation in ENQA activities;
- participation to international projects in quality assurance (since 2007);
- participation in ENQA co-ordinated quality assurance projects (since 2009);
- organization in Romania of quality assurance international events (ENQA General Assembly – October, 2011, CEENQA General Assembly – May, 2013 – work in progress) etc;
- participation to international events organized by INQAAHE;
- co-operation with European International Professional Organizations (i.e. ENAEE).

The total number of decisions taken by ARACIS on accreditation or evaluation amounts to over 5700 (as of 17.10.2012), since the activity of the agency started. From the date of the previous SER in 2009 the total numer of accreditation and evaluation reports is over 3500.

1.4 Structure of Human resources

ARACIS operates with six categories of human resources, described also in more detail under compliance with ESG 3.4 – Resources:

i) ARACIS Council, composed of 25 members (23 academics and 2 students)

According to a recent (December 19, 2012) modification of the Law, the Agency is lead by a Council of 25 members, with high academic and moral status, 23 holding teaching positions in the higher education system and two student representatives. Rectors and any other persons who hold high official positions within the Presidency, the Government or the Parliament cannot become members of the Council of ARACIS, in order to ensure complete independence and transparence.

The Law stipulates that from the academic members of the Council, five are members of the Executive Board, which is the structure that has to ensure the daily management routine of the Agency. Two of the five members of the Executive Board, the President of the Council and the Vice-president, are elected by their peers via a secret voting procedure. The other three members of the Board are appointed by the President and serve as Directors of Departments (Accreditation and External Quality Evaluation, respectively) and Secretary General.

ii) External evaluators (academics or researchers)

The evaluators are registered in the National Register of ARACIS Evaluators (NRAE) which includes both *Romanian* and *international* academics and researchers. The Agency has its own "National Register of ARACIS Evaluators (NRAE)" which includes 1333 evaluators (professors, senior lecturers or 1st. degree researchers). From the members included in the NRAE, some are members of the 15 Permanent (Standing) Specialty Commissions which are active in the

following domains: basic and natural sciences; humanities and theology; law; social sciences, political and administrative sciences; economic sciences (two commissions); arts, architecture, urban planning and sports; agriculture, forestry and veterinary medicine; engineering sciences (two commissions); medical sciences; distance learning; institutional evaluation for managerial and financial activities, employers representatives. As in the case of the Council members, in order to ensure complete independence and transparence, persons holding official positions, such as Rectors, or others cannot continue to be active as evaluators. The evaluators are selected for different missions with due care as to avoid conflict of interests.

iii) Student evaluators, representing the students' unions active in Romania which have obtained a legal status. The student evaluators, who are proposed by the students' unions or act in their own capacity, become eligible for evaluation missions only after having been trained.

iv) Professional staff, with the mission and expertise to assist the Council, the directors of the Accreditation Department and External Evaluation Department of the ARACIS Council, respectively, the Permanent Specialty Commissions and all other evaluators in organizing and running the external evaluation procedures;

v) Administrative staff, responsible for the administration, financial matters, archive, communication and maintenance of the premises.

The total number of the permanent professional and administrative staff was initially limited by law to 35. Following a recent legislative initiative (**Law amending Emergency Government Ordinance no. 75/2005 on providing quality education – April, 2011**) the restriction was lifted and ARACIS can dimension the number of professional and administrative staff according to the activity of the agency.

vi) **Other staff,** hired on temporary basis, who assist the agency for different purposes, such as external financial auditors, lawyers etc.

All the working documents, methodology and guides are published on the ARACIS web site, http://www.aracis.ro and as brochures made available to all the stakeholders.

2. Compliance with Part 3 - European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies

The paragraph numbers of each standard of the ESG are those used in the ESG.

3.1- Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

Standard: The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

ARACIS Compliance

ARACIS undertakes external QA-activities on a regular basis. Activities such as periodic/cyclical evaluation and in view of accreditation at study programs as well as at HE institution level are part of the core current functions of ARACIS.

The concepts, procedures and processes developed by ARACIS for external quality assurance are differentiated in order to take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the ESGs.

Sequencing and references for quality assurance

(Requested by universities or Cyclical evaluations)

LEGAL FRAMEWORK (as per Law 86/2006 – OUG 75/2011, with subsequent modifications)		
QUALITY ASSURANCE DOMAINS *for QA of education providers in Higher Education*		
a. Institutional Capacity	*b. Effectiveness of Education*	*c. Internal Quality Management*
Criteria and Standards *(as specified by ARACIS)*	*Criteria and Standards* *(as specified by ARACIS)*	*Criteria and Standards* *(as specified by ARACIS)*
Performance indicators *(as specified by ARACIS)*	*Performance indicators* *(as specified by ARACIS)*	*Performance indicators* *(as specified by ARACIS)*
HE Provider: Self Evaluation Report (SER) of Study Program or HEI		
ARACIS: External Evaluation Panel - Analysis of SER + Site visit(s)		
CONCLUSIONS: preliminary, moderation procedures		
JUDGMENT		
APPEALS PROCEDURE		
FINAL JUDGMENT: communication of results to HEI and Ministry of National Education		
ARACIS and **HE Provider:** FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES		

The first characteristic of the external evaluation is that it uses standards, criteria and performance indicators fit-for-purpose for study programs, according to the Bologna cycles: 1st cycle (Licență, equivalent to the Bachelor's degree), 2nd cycle (Master degree) and 3rd cycle (Doctoral degree). These are included and published in the Evaluation Guide.

Thus, while the general concepts of quality domains and standards are basically the same, according to the Law, their corresponding performance indicators can be different and specific according to the type of degree obtained after graduation (Licență, Master or Doctorate).

The second parameter differentiates in terms of the scope of the external evaluation process by making the distinction between *periodic/cyclical* quality *assurance evaluation of (already) accredited study programs or HE institutions* and *external evaluation for accreditation*. While both evaluations are contributing to quality enhancement, the *periodic external evaluation* and the *external evaluation aiming to accreditation* have their own specificities.

The ARACIS proposal for *accreditation* is considered as a particular result of the external evaluation of *study programs or institutions*, followed legally by a formal recognition by the authorities, as a "certification" of an external quality assurance evaluation with satisfactory outcomes (results). In the process of accreditation, the external evaluation is expected to certify firstly the compliance of an institution or study program with pre-determined minimal performance indicators, and is finalized with the "yes/no" binary-type final judgment, with a proposal which either grants or does not grant the right to function to a HEI or study program.

According to the Law, accreditation is a two-steps legal procedure: whenever an education provider intends to establish/open a new HEI or initiates a new study program that corresponds to a specific qualification, that provider is submitted to a process of external evaluation in order to be first provisionally authorized and then accredited only after successfully running the study program for a number of years (i.e.: for "Licență" study programs - the interval between the graduation date of the first cohort of students and the date of the application for accreditation should not exceed two years; for HE education providers as institutions – only after the accreditation of three study programs).

In the process of *periodic external quality assurance evaluation of accredited study programs* or *institutions*, the external evaluation aims mainly to take as reference the standards and indicators of quality set to fit the mission and purposes of the study program or HEI and provides an external feed-back for further development and enhancing its institutional quality provision (for instance, performance indicators raised at "reference values" set by the institution, based on its own goals and after a benchmarking process).

As it was already mentioned, accredited HEI and study programs are subject to a periodic (cyclical - every 5 years) external evaluation of its quality management and education provision. The external evaluation of accredited HEI refers also to the functioning of about 20% of already accredited study programs which are selected together by both the HEI and ARACIS. In such a process, the key reference of the institutional external evaluation remains the accredited HEI as an entity. The 20% of the accredited study programs are evaluated to keep alive the dynamics of the quality enhancement process, to help the institution with periodic evaluations of study programs and to insure permanent contact between the institutions and the Agency. Thus, the process is not static, all the study programs and institutional management have to improve the level of performance indicators as compared to the previous external evaluation.

The procedures of decision taking and reporting, related to Part 2 of the ESGs, are followed thoroughly by the agency, which started to use a special form-sheet for monitoring the sequence of the activities in the process and developed a dedicataed dadabase to include comprehensive information from all accredited HEIs.

3.2 - Official status

Standard: Agencies should be formally recognized by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

ARACIS Compliance

ARACIS was established by the Law for the purposes, *inter alia*, of externally evaluating and quality assuring higher education providers who either currently, or plan to award HE qualifications. In view of Art. 16(1) of the Law, "ARACIS is an autonomous public institution, of national interest, having a legal status ("personalitate juridică") and its own budget of revenue and expenses". In order to further assure the legal basis for ARACIS, the Law stipulates that the ARACIS headquarters, organizational structures and internal rules of functioning are adopted by decision of ARACIS Council. Therefore, once the ARACIS Methodology is approved, the Government and particularly the Ministry of National Education have no direct institutional influence on the ARACIS decisions with regard to its organization and its activity for the external evaluation of the institutional and study programs quality assurance. Furthermore, the Ministry delivers the official forms of the diplomas to be filled in by higher education institutions and awarded to their graduates only for institutions and study programs having fulfilled all the legal requirements regarding QA and accreditation. If a HEI or study programme is not authorized but delivers diplomas, these diplomas are not legally recognized and the persons and institutions having acted in this sense are held responsible according to the law.

ARACIS is thus an autonomous, officially (legally) entrusted Agency which provides services related to HE quality assurance and accreditation. The services are provided in three related ways:

(a) co-operation with HEIs for identifying quality issues from a Romanian and European (global) perspective;

(b) responding to specific demands of the national authorities with regard to academic quality assurance issues and to quality external evaluation;

(c) responding to academic entrepreneurs who intend to establish new study programs and/or HEI through processes of accreditation. In addition, whenever ARACIS considers it relevant, it

may initiate processes of addressing specific quality issues through studies and external evaluations.

ARACIS organization and activities comply with other requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate, such as the Government Ordinance on Tarrifs 1731/2006 – Annex 4, the provision of the Government Ordinance on self-financing of the Agency - Annex 5 and the Methodology for External Evaluation – Annex 6 thus strenghtening the independence of the Agency.

3.3 - Activities

Standard: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

Guidelines: These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.

ARACIS Compliance

As indicated under ESG 3.1, according to the Law, the core activities of ARACIS are performed on a regular basis and include the following:

(a) external evaluation for accreditation of study programs; (b) external evaluation for accreditation of Higher Education Institutions; (c) periodic external evaluations (periodic reviews) for quality assurance in accredited higher education institutions or study programs; (d) HE system evaluations.

To be noted that, according to the Law of National Education (art. 194 al. 2), in Romania acredditation of HEIs and study programs, periodic external evaluation for quality assurance of accredited institutions may also be undertaken by any agency listed in the European Register of QA Agencies, on a contractual basis.

The overall synopsis of the activites performed by ARACIS in the period 2007 – present is shown in Annex 7. In Annex 7 the type of evaluation is indicated, together with the outcomes. We underline again that **evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities are termed in this report as "evaluation",** due to difficulty in the English-Romanian translation and vice-versa.

The preliminary requirements conditioning accreditation are of normative type, obligatory, detailed and more quantitatively oriented. This situation requires reflects the complex situation in Romania, where public and private universities are part of the academic system. All Romanian universities are, as everywhere in the world, in competition for students and resources and equal QA conditions needs to be demonstrated by each of them in order to make the competiton as fair as possible, for the benefit of students. It is also to be noted that in Romania the public sector offers education to approx. 2/3 of the total number of students and the private sector to the rest. The criteria, standards and performance indicators are the same for both public and private sectors of HE.

The nature and aims of the external evaluations and the activities are described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Accreditation

i) In order to verify if a **new or existing higher education institution is capable to start an activity in a given study domain or extend its activity in a new study domain**, most of the preliminary requirements are mostly of a quantitative type and refer extensively to institutional and study program capability in order to clearly support the final provisional authorizing proposal, as a first step to accreditation.

This approach gives ARACIS a sound quantitative basis to provide convincing answers when the proposal denying accreditation is contested and even defend possible judicial cases brought against it. As new "academic entrepreneurs" and their institutions and programs are expected to continue to emerge, ARACIS must still use a number of detailed quantitative requirements and indicators while developing new standards within the legal provisions. **ii) The evaluation of part-time and distance learning study programs**, with indication of emergence of new on-line and trans-national type. Some specific indicators and procedures were formulated and adopted in this regard too.

iii) Specific evaluation of Master programs and Master domains - ARACIS already evaluated a number of 2157 **Master programs**, at the request of the interested institutions, in view of accreditation. Master programs may be focused on research, namely the advanced study in a scientific domain, on complementarities, namely inter-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary connecting different domains, or on professionalization, namely gaining professional competences in a specialised domain. In the external evaluation made in view of accreditation, the provisions of the *Government's Decision no. 404/2006 with regard to the organization and implementation of Master's Degree studies* are also applied. The evaluation process, standards and performance indicators are presented in the second part of the ARACIS Guide I for external evaluation - http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie_-_Proceduri/Part_I_-_STUDY_PROGRAMMES_ACCREDITATION.pdf

The evaluation of Master's domains will start soon, in accordance with the provisions of the new Law of National Education: "The accreditation of a domain for the Master degree education together with the maximum number of the students that can be admitted and who can receive a graduation diploma is done by agovernment decision, based on an external evaluation performed by ARACIS or by another quality assurance agency from Romania or abroad, listed in the European Quality Assurance Register, hereinafter referred to as EQAR."

As indicated before, the new type of evaluation, namely evaluation of Master domains in view of accreditation is about to start, after the new procedure is approved by Government decision. Cyclical Master programs evaluation continues to be part of periodical institutional evaluation and in this way ARACIS has already re-evaluated a significant number of Master programs.

iv) For doctoral programs, though the "Bologna type" 3rd cycle university studies" should also be accredited by ARACIS, the initial steps have so far been taken, with a new draft of the Methodology. However, a joint evaluation by an international panel of Romanian and Bulgarian specialists of the Doctoral programs and schools in one university in Bulgaria and in one university in Romania was performed as a pilot.

Periodic external evaluation for quality assurance of accredited study programs and institutions

The Law requires that accredited HEIs and study programs are subject to a periodic (cyclical, every 5 years) external evaluation of institutional quality assurance mechanisms and compliance with the ESGs. The implication is that the HEIs are made fully responsible for establishing and developing those institutional capacities, educational effectiveness and quality management processes that satisfy their specific positioning in the higher education system and for the level of accountability to their stakeholders. ARACIS provides, through its Methodology, all HEIs with a framework of standards and performance indicators which are to be taken as reference points by the accredited HEIs. This means that HEIs are expected to:

- define their own level of performance for each performance indicator in line with their own mission statement ("reference values") and prove they have achieved them;

- establish new standards and performance indicators of their own and prove how they have achieved them;

- compare themselves with other HEIs from Romania and from elsewhere by developing appropriate benchmarks;

- inform students, stakeholders and the public at large on their quality provision;

- create databases that correspond to the standards and performanceindicators.

Then, in the periodic evaluation process ARACIS must evaluate compliance with the ESG, the degree of conformity with the standards and performance indicators which have supported the accreditation and, in addition, stress on evaluating how the institution or study program has improved the level of quality by meeting the goals specified according to the own "reference" performance indicators or to their own new quality standards.

HE System evaluations: monitoring quality in higher education

Following the first ENQA co-ordinated review of ARACIS **in 2008** a large number of Romanian universities and study programs have been evaluated by the agency. This was an opportunity to broaden the area of institutional evaluation by covering a large part of the higher education landscape. As a result of the system (transversal) evaluations anumber of strong and weak points were identified. The Quality Barometers (see Annex 8, Annex 9) provide valuable information on the strong and weak points identified in the Romanian HE system. However, although the comments reflect the opinion and position of the main contributors, these were published

unaltered by the agency in order to make their findings public and to be used for further interpretation, in correlation with additional data. Due to this option, some of the conclusions of the Quality Barometers must be used with due care.

Standard: Agencies should have adequate and proportionate resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organize and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

ARACIS Compliance

Human resource

Since the previous ENQA co-ordinated review of the agency, in **April 2011 (Annex 1)** the **Law approving Emergency Government Ordinance no. 75/2005 on providing quality education** – was modified in the sense that the Agency was empowered to better match its number of permanent staff positions to its evolving working demand and to include two student representatives as full members of the Council (initially, until April 2011 the students had only observer status).

ARACIS operates with five categories of human resources, on the basis of the principles established in the Code of Professional Ethics – Annex 10:

i) According with recent new legislation (Ordinance 92/ December 2012) **ARACIS Council** has 25 members (23 academics, *to represent different study domains* and 2 students). Therefore, part of the present composition of the ARACIS Council was established according to ARACIS selection procedure in September 2009 (13 academics) as well as to the selection procedure of February – March 2013 (in progress – for 10 more academics); since 2011, the 2 students were reconfirmed yearly by their respective students organizations at the beginning of each academic year.

ii) External evaluators (teaching or research staff), who are voluntarily registered in the National Register of ARACIS Evaluators (NRAE) which includes both Romanian and international academics.

The role of the evaluators, that of the Permanent (standing) Specialty Commissions and the selection of the panels was briefly described in the introductory part of this self-evaluation report. To help the agency and the evaluators, an electronic facility has been developed and implemented which allows the agency to test the level of understanding of the QA procedures of the agency of all the external evaluators, local and from abroad, who intend to become eligible to take part in evaluation of study programs and higher education institutions. Thus, the evaluators listed in the NRAE undergo a thorough selection, which takes place in electronic form as an online real-time evaluation process. Following this testing, which is also a learning exercise for

the candidates the number of evaluators in the register is now of 1333 (see http://pfe.aracis.ro/cms/).

The composition of the Standing committees has been periodically revised after an analysis of the quality of their work and interaction with the universities.

iii) Students evaluators, representing the main Students' Unions active in Romania with a legal status, namely ANOSR, UNSR and to a lesser extent USR. At the same time, through the modification of the ARACIS composition **by the Law, recognizing the importance of the students as major stakeholders within the higher education system, two supplementary positions of member of the Council were created and were entrusted to the representatives of the two main and active Romanian Students Unions**. Therefore, students participate, throughout the Council, to the debates and the decision-making process.

Up to the date, several training sessions were organized for an average of 120 students, out of which around 75 already participated in the external evaluation panels at institutional level. Training student evaluators is a permanent task for ARACIS and the students' organizations due to the fact that a number of trained students graduate each year and leave the educational system. One more joint training session will be organized, under the responsibility of ANOSR.

iv) Professional staff, the Accreditation Department and External QA Evaluation Department of the ARACIS Council. Their responsibilities are multiple: to receive and technically control institutional applications, distribute them to the panels of evaluators, assisting evaluation panels in their activity, assuring proper and follow –up of documents, assisting in writing reports and analyses.

The quality of the activity of permanent staff has been monitored by several procedures which are stipulated in the Romanian legislation. As a result of this process, which is performed on a yearly basis, but also when there are special requirements, one staff member had to leave the agency in April 2011 since the level of performance was considered un-satisfactory at all three evaluations. Several permanent staff participated in study visits organized by the agency to our ENQA partner agencies, in which other stakeholders were invited to take part in order to help with the understanding of other European experience in quality assurance in higher education and application of the ESGs. (see Annex 11 - the list of agencies visited by ARACIS delegations under the framework of the project ACADEMIS).

v) Administrative and financial staff, who is led by a financial director, responsible for financial matters, accountable to the President of the ARACIS Council.

The existing professional and administrative staff is considered adequate in numbers and quality to enable the Agency to organize and operate its external quality assurance processes in an active and efficient manner based on the current scale of activities.

The ARACIS Council set-up professional other staff development activities, including by using the resources of the projects implemented over the 2008-2013 period. For instance, as proficiency in English was found to be limited for some staff, trainings were organized after

passing a test applied to all personnel. One impediment to hire new staff is the legal limitation forbidding public institutions to hire more personnel and, in the past three years, obliging them to cut salaries up to 25%. Another aspect addressed throughout the EU funded project ACADEMIS was the nomination of the "mission scientific secretaries", meant to give assistance to review panels for institutional evaluations which were in excess of the normal work-hours of permanent staff members.

Based on the new provision of the Law, a Public Relations and International Relations department was created. Together with other internal structures of the agency, it contributes to the management of other and, hopefully, of further approved EU funded projects which have been submitted and are to be evaluated by the Ministry of National Education in order to be approved.

ORGANISATION CHART OF THE ROMANIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ARACIS
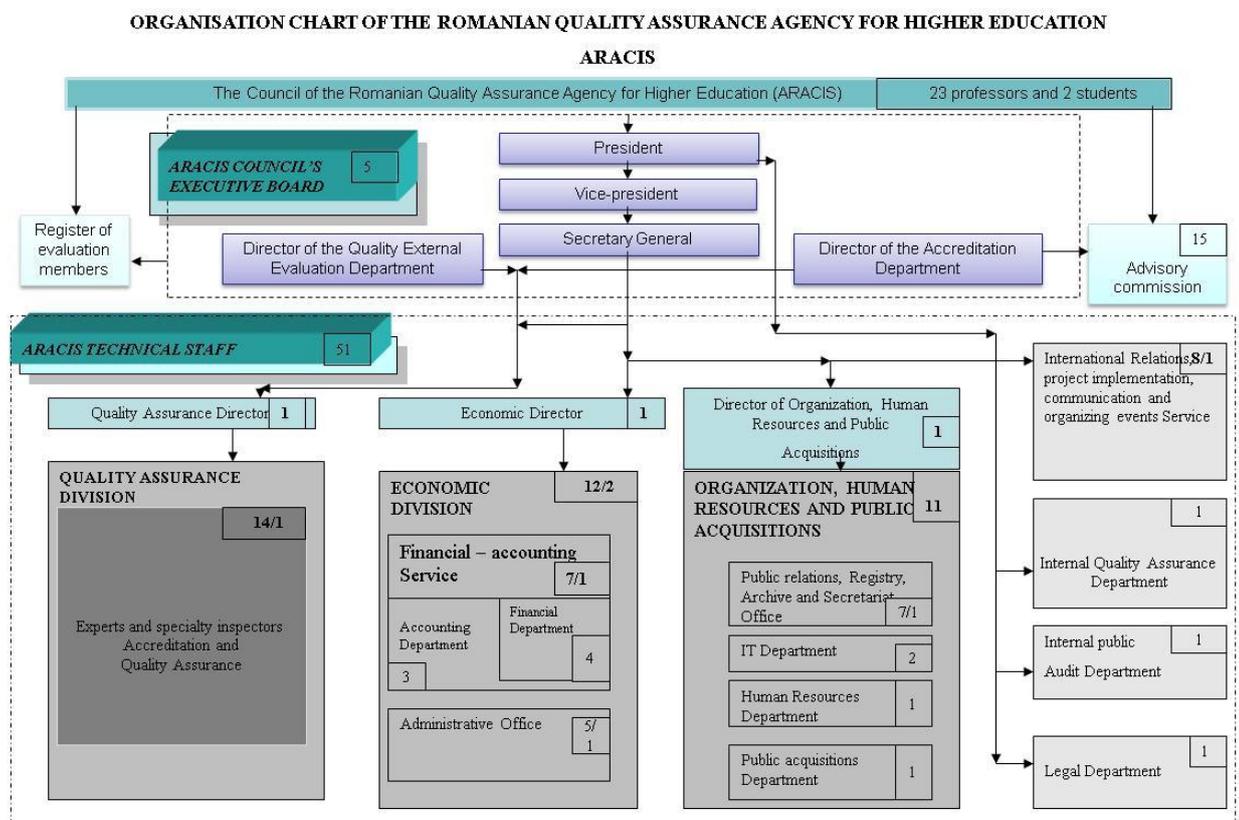
Financial resources

With regard to the **financial resources**, ARACIS relies on the following sources of income:

- **Fee income** from higher education institutions and other higher education providers, which cover the costs of the external evaluations. The amount of fees is specified by Government decision according to specific criteria, such as study program level, as student number of the institution etc.

- **Contracts** with the Ministry of National Education, when it requests the undertaking of specific activities, and/or the external evaluation of quality assurance at institutional level.

- **Funds attracted following successful participation in public competitions** (tenders) for EU structural funds when the priorities of interest regard quality in higher education. This possibility allowed ARACIS to apply for several projects. Two projects were financed and implemented by ARACIS as beneficiary; in several others ARACIS acted as partner.

In 2012, fee income represented more than 91% of ARACIS revenue and the EU financed projects and interest rates made up the rest. ARACIS has managed to keep the expenditures within its approved annual budget and secure a roll-over revenue of about 20% of the 2012 budget for activities to be performed after the fees were cashed-in.

The financial auditing of ARACIS was done by registered external auditors and the accounting rules are those of an agency of public utility.

Funding of the agency provides appropriate resources for the development of the processes and procedures as well for particpation in the activities of ENQA, such as projects, working groups, quality assurance Fora.

ARACIS is trying to constantly improve its own internal QA process and procedures, as a condition of up-grading a sound internal quality culture.

Premises

In terms of **premises** ARACIS uses the office rooms rented from the Bucharest University, as the different attempts to acquire its own building failed, due to the scarce and expensive offer of adequate office spaces.

Website

The **website** of the Agency was reorganized and has become more friendly and effective, contributing to improved visibility of the activity of ARACIS. The new English version includes also the procedures for international evaluators to become listed in the Register of external evaluators and on the site one can find accurate data on the current activities, as well as information on organization, procedures, results of evaluation, legislative framework, international activities, publication, projects etc.

3.5 - Mission statement

Standard: Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

Guidelines: These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labor with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic

approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

ARACIS Compliance

ARACIS serves the public interest by realizing quality standards for study programs and Higher Education institutions and by supporting the continuous enhancement of quality management. The standards and procedures developed and used by ARACIS are in accordance with ESG. The Mission statement of ARACIS is available on the website of ARACIS – www.aracis.ro, both in Romanian and in English.

ARACIS' carries out the quality external evaluation of education provided by higher education institutions and by other organisations providing higher education study programs, which operates in Romania with the aim of:

- testing, according to quality standards, the capacity of education providing organisations to fulfil the beneficiaries' expectations;
- contributing to the development of an institutional culture of higher education quality;
- assuring the protection of direct beneficiaries of study programs at higher education level by producing and disseminating systematic, coherent and credible information, publicly accessible, about education quality;
- proposing to the Ministry of National Education strategies and policies of permanently improving higher education quality, in close correlation with pre-university education.

The Mission statement is thus organized around four key-concepts that underline ARACIS' work - **quality** (*constant review* and *enhancement* of quality, including of its own activities), **information** and **transparency** (informing stakeholders and the public, by periodical reports on the state of quality of the HE sector), **co-operation** (both with HEIs and similar QA-agencies), European and **international relevance** and visibility (by co-operating with other relevant European and international bodies).

Therefore, based on that mission statement, the key activities of ARACIS are related to setting standards (performance indicators, benchmarks), quality improvement services to the academic community and providing information to the public, to other stakeholders and participants (including students) of HEIs and study programmes.

The mission and the activity of ARACIS are in accordance with the legislative regulations in force in Romania.

3.6 - Independence

Standard: Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and

recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

ARACIS Compliance

Under the current legislation in force, ARACIS enjoys a high degree of independence in its organization and full independence in all its operational activities and decisions.

There is no formal possibility, for any governmental or institutional body, to influence one way or the other the processes of recruiting/nominating external evaluators and the outcome of their external evaluation. The eligibility for membership of the ARACIS Council is set out in the Law and the Council is fully autonomous in selecting its members using its own procedure, the By-Laws and internal regulations of the Agency and also in choosing its own evaluators. The decisions of the Council are taken independently, according to clear procedures made publicly available, the right to appeal is granted, and the procedures for dealing with such appeals are in place and public. The decisions and recommendations cannot be influenced by third parties. Thus, ARACIS is an autonomous body and is independent from any external interference with its work and decisions. Financial independence from Governmental and other institutions is also granted by law.

3.7 - External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

Standard: The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- **a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process**
- **an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency**
- **publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes**
- **a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.**
Guidelines: Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes.

Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people.

Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences, should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.

ARACIS compliance

The process, domains, criteria, standards and performance indicators used by ARACIS in the external evaluations are pre-defined in the Methodology and its accompanying Guides. The Methodology is legally enforced by a Government Decision nr. 1418/2006 in order to provide the legal basis for ARACIS actions and approaches. All these documents are available in Romanian and English both in printed form and on line (ARACIS website). The Guides have been up-dated in accordance with the findings of the system-wide analyses and the developments in the higher education system.

These documents have two complementary functions:

(a) to provide and disseminate the legal framework and guidelines for HEIs and study programs in their approach to developing and improving quality;

(b) to be used effectively in the process of quality external evaluation by both the agency and HEIs.

The process of evaluation process includes:

(i) **a self-evaluation** (assessment) report by the provider on the quality assurance process (subject of the quality assurance process) in view of its mission and objectives. The ARACIS Guide specifies for self-evaluation the need for clarity and synthetic presentation, allowing the institution/study program to use the framework of the format report as a platform for introducing its own ideas and comments. The self-evaluation report is expected to be objective and be supported by the evidence made available for documenting that self-analysis. The expectation is that the self-evaluation is as analytical as possible, identifying both strengths and weaknesses. This should be the outcome of an on-going internal process that involves staff, students and stakeholders. According to the Law, the quality domains and criteria taken as references are: institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management.

(ii) **an external evaluation** (assessment) by a panel of independent experts selected from the ARACIS register of external evaluators, avoiding possible conflict of interests situations; the panel includes, as appropriate, student member(s) and international evaluator(s) for all institutional evaluations; site visits are obligatory for all evaluations. Site visits are planned well in advance and the calendar and actions are agreed upon by the panel and representatives of the institution or study program.

(iii) **the drafting and then publication of a report** including decisions, recommendations and formal outcomes, including the final summative judgment; **Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people.** Before proceeding to draft a report on the site visit, the visit panel presents the evidence found during the site-visit to the representatives of the provider, without entering into the formulation of final decisions.

For Study programs evaluations the draft report of the panel is submitted firstly to the Permanent Specialty Commission in charge with the study domain in order to assure that the procedures applied and the contents of the report are in line with the regulations and consistent with decisions taken in other comparable evaluations. In case certain points do not seem to be well documented, the institution or study program is invited to further the evidence.

In order to make sure that the conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though preliminary reports are formed by groups of different people, the Departments of accreditation and of External quality evaluation of the agency are consulted, before the proposals for both study programs and/or institutional evaluations are presented to the Council for the final judgment. Both departments include Council members, with the exception of the President and Vice-President, and one of the student members of the Council. The draft-report of the corresponding Department is presented to the ARACIS Council for analysis and endorsement. After approval by the Council the report is made public. A follow-up policy is proposed by the provider after considering the recommendations from the report. ARACIS co-operates with the education provider for finalizing the follow-up measures which are to be implemented during a pre-established period, generally one year.

The Law, the Methodology and Guides support the follow-up procedure, as it predetermined and applied by ARACIS, as per ESG 2.6 Follow-up procedures. **The follow-up procedure** aims to review actions taken by the provider in the light of the recommendations formulated in the report, in case the recommendations require a subsequent action plan. When such an action plan is not considered, as it is the case of the highest *"degree of confidence"* quality judgment awarded to an institution or study program, the follow-up procedure is considered after three years in the form of a short visit to the institution as well in the annual meetings of ARACIS with representatives of the National Rectors' Council.

The proposed new quality assurance project mentioned in this SER is expected to clarify also to what extent more detailed follow-up procedures need to be implemented when the external evaluation has found a very good quality level, in correlation with the development of a "benchmarking culture", without contributing to the "quality evaluation fatigue" on institutions.

(iv) Since the **agency makes formal quality assurance decisions with conclusions which have then formal consequences, it has an appeals procedure.**

The appeals procedure is published on the site of the agency. (see Annex 12) and http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie-Proceduri/Appeal_proceedings__Modifications_of_the_Guide_-_Part_III_.pdf)

After publication of the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* on ARACIS website, if the institution considers that there are reasons of the type mentioned above, it may make an appeal in writing against the rating given by the agency, *within maximum two weeks since its publication*, by means of a letter registered to the agency within the mentioned date. Usually, not later than 30 days since receipt of the appeal, the **ARACIS Council's Executive Board** reviews the report and invites the university rector and the contact person for a discussion of clarification. If after discussion, the university representatives consider that the agency's report is based on

real and documented evidence, the appeal may be withdrawn in writing and the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* published on the website shall be deemed approved in its original form.

If, after this discussion, the university representatives maintain their appeal or if they do not wish to participate in the discussion, the appeal is settled in accordance with the methodology. If an appeal is received, the duration of the evaluation period is extended by right for the necessary period to resolve the appeal. **ARACIS Council's Executive Board** specifies the nature of the appeal respectively classifies it within one of the categories *Appeals relating to procedural flaws* or *Appeals relating to issues of ethics*, and appoints a speciality inspector to make a preliminary analysis of the file.

Reporting procedures will be described in detail when under the presentation of compliance with ESG 2.5 – Reporting.

ARACIS has been constantly committed to achieving in a professional manner the requirements of evaluation processes. Among the strategies that have been so far used are:

(i)   a member of the ARACIS Council negotiates with the rector of the institution the calendar and the process, and remains in charge to make sure the procedure is strictly followed until the preparation of the report;

(ii)   in selecting the evaluation panel, due attention is paid to achieving a balance and maintaining a high level of competence, as well as avoiding conflicts of interests;

(iii)   the evaluation is consistently made with reference to predefined criteria and standards. The key shortcoming of the new approach based on learning outcomes is, as already stated, the overall weak academic culture of operating with learning outcomes. It is in this respect that ARACIS will invest much of its future work related to the operations of the qualifications framework.

3.8 - Accountability procedures

Standard: Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

Guidelines: These procedures are expected to include the following:

1. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;

2. Documentation which demonstrates that:

- **the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance**
- **the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts**

- **the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties**
- **the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (ie means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/Board); an internal reflection mechanism (ie means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (ie means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.**

3. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years.

ARACIS Compliance

ARACIS operates within the requirements set by Romanian legislation. Based on this legislation, ARACIS adopted rules and regulations to assure transparency of its work. All relevant documents are emphasizing the internal quality assurance of the institution and are published and available on the website.

At the same time, ARACIS developed clear documents revealing the fact that the agency's activities are oriented towards its mission and goals of quality assurance.

In order to avoid all conflict-of-interest situations, there are clear and improved mechanisms to avoid potential conflicts of interests which are put in place. Also, in relation to that aspect, the Code of Ethics was revised, with the implementing of a new "no conflict of interest" (or "independence") clause to be signed by evaluators.

With regard to the internal quality assurance processes, in order to improve all internal quality assurance procedures, the agency has developed an Internal Quality Assurance Manual of Procedures covering all the administrative aspects of the current activities (see Annex 13). The internal QA system is now clearly described. The full implementation is now gradually in progress. Thus, the internal feedback is of outmost importance for the ARACIS management and there are periodical meetings with the staff and relevant stakeholders. Following input from staff, several improvements of the internal procedures were proposed and implemented after approval of the Council. Also, in terms of external feedback, many of the recommendations made by relevant stakeholders were taken into account and the Board members of the Council as well as the Council as a whole remain in close contact with rectors, the Education Committees of the Parliament and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research.

The Executive Board of ARACIS holds periodic meetings with permanent staff to collect feedback, to understand better the current problems trying to improve the activity or solve the problems. As already mentioned in this report, several permanent staff participated in study visits organized by the agency to our ENQA partner agencies in order to help with the understanding of other European experiences in quality assurance in higher education and application of the ESGs.

A very complex study regarding the ARACIS activity in the Romanian educational context (universities' opinions, students' opinions, ARACIS external evaluators' opinions, representatives of the labour market etc.) was realized in 2010 and made public in the Quality Barometer (see Annex 9). ARACIS used this study to improve some standards, performace indicators and activities in the new Methodology for external evaluation proposed to the MEN. As for the mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years, this criterion is being fulfilled through this self-evaluation report.

The members of the ARACIS Council, external evaluators and also some staff members participated in many events organized by ENQA, CEENQA or INQAAHE to be aware with what it is happening concerning quality assurance in higher education at the international level. The trainings organized by ENQA for external evaluators, for the agencies which prepare the self-evaluation reports or meetings for internal quality assurance at the agencies level (staff development) were very usefull for our agency. ARACIS is also member of QAN (Quality Audit Network), a non-formal network which proposes to increase the collaboration between agencies for institutional evaluations and also to share experiences and good practices. ARACIS was partner in the ENQA Project 2010-2012 – ProENQA.

ARACIS actively participates in the ENQA Working Groups on Excellence, Implementation and Staff Development.

ARACIS is also a partner organisation in the project Quest for Quality for Students (QUEST), project developed by European Students' Union. QUEST try to identify a true European student viewpoint on quality and the ways to enhance it through an European student survey, to explore the possibilities to promote change by targeting the rapid capacity building of student unions in order for then to lead student centred discussions on quality.

3. Compliance with Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines

This section of the self-evaluation itemises the individual standards and guidelines of the ESG, which are followed by ARACIS account of the way in which it meets them, together with the sources of relevant evidence. The paragraph numbers of each standard of the ESG are those used in the ESG.

2.1 - Use of internal quality assurance procedures

Standard: "External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines".

Guidelines: The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met.

If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.

ARACIS Compliance

In the EHEA external quality assurance evaluation procedures start from the assumption of confidence in the effectiveness of internal quality assurance procedures. Thus, the main and most important document from which the external evaluation of a higher education institution starts is the institutional/study program Self Evaluation Report (SER). Understanding the external evaluation as a constructive process makes self evaluation the most important part of it.

As a consequence of many years of experience, more and more universities understand that evaluations (internal or external) are not to demonstrate that the quality of educational/research processes is perfect but quality assurance in higher education should become and remain an on-going process in the context of dynamic society and economic environment.

One of the main tasks of ARACIS was to determine the main approach for the definition of quality and relate it to the universities internal quality assurance processes. To this aim, consultation of academic and other stakeholders was very important as well as taking into into account and presenting the international standards, guidelines (ESG) and definitions, and making a set of concepts acceptable throughout the system.

As shown bfore, the ARACIS external evaluation is focused, according to the Law, on three quality domains: Institutional capacity, Educational effectiveness and *Quality management*.

Following the requirements of ESG 2.1, each HEI has an Internal Commission in charge of QA, under the coordination of the Rector. The QA Commissions must have policies, a database and specific internal QA procedures, while considering the ESG as an important reference for internal QA. Also, involvement of the professional world in internal quality assurance procedures of HE institutions gained in relevance and effectiveness, as ARACIS encouraged initiatives to structurally improve the position of these QA-structures, and thus increase further development of quality culture and to include participation of all stakeholders, especially from the world of employment. The projects that ARACIS has undertaken with European funding were taken as positive steps towards this situation, thus contributing to strengthen the quality culture within Romanian HEIs and strengthening the relevant QA- structures within HEIs, e.g. by promoting an actively approach and by increasing the number of quality assurance - events and debates within institutions.

As QA should always be internally driven (even if there are external incentives) and aimed at enhancing the quality of activities - usually through recommendations for further action - and therefore foster a quality culture. One of ARACIS objectives is to help universities understand better that the aim of quality evaluation (internal or external) is not to demonstrate to "the public" that the educational process is perfect. Quality assurance in higher education is a dynamic process in the context of a dynamic society – we have quoted many times Peter

Williams, former President of ENQA who said that "in higher education for quality assurance the journey is probably more important than the destination".

At the same time, ARACIS developed a number of other initiatives, described below, to promote internal quality assurance within universities, supported by European funding.

As a reminder, we note that as early as the period 2007 - 2008, ARACIS developed a Matra project – NEQ (Network for Higher Education Quality) with the scope to promote and sustain quality assurance and evaluation in the Romanian higher education system through the creation of a quality assurance national network, based on best-practices and policy transfers from the Dutch partner in the project (Dutch Inspectorate of Higher Education). One of the most important events taking place yearly in Romania is **the *Institutional Strategic Quality Management*** Organized by the Technical University "Gh.Asachi" of Iasi, in which the networking is effective and on a permanent basis, at the intiative of a university.

ARACIS continued to support the improvement of internal quality assurance systems for higher education institutions in Romania throughout the ACADEMIS project, implemented during the 2008-2011 period, in which an important number of internal evaluators from the universities were trained (representatives of Quality Assurance Departments of Romanian universities) in order to assure a link between internal and external quality assurance.

In parallel, from 2009 ARACIS is partner of a project proposed by the Medical University "Iuliu Hatieganu" of Cluj-Napoca. The scope of the project - *Specific standards and Performance Indicators for Health Higher Education* comes from the fact that study programs organized at medicine and pharmacy universities are different from other forms of higher education, most of them preparing the graduates to work in regulated professions in the EU. This element has required the development and application of specific standards, both in the internal and external quality evaluations. The project aims to build a rigorous quality evaluation tool, in which specific and detailed quality requirements at European standards are mentioned. These requirements must be met by health higher education institutions and research programs offered by these institutions, thus developing a common reference system that is able to improve the educational offer in this field of study. A series of studies and analyses will still be made, regarding the situations in the medicine and pharmacy universities. As a second step, a set of specific standards will be elaborated, to be implemented in the consortium universities and adopted by the ARACIS Council, as a national evaluation tool of the health higher education quality. Monitoring will be performed, in order to apply and disseminate the new standards. The expected benefits of developing these new, specific, quality standards are multiple: putting into place of an internal review mechanism and continuous improvement of results and academic performance; enabling inter-comparability of university performance; increased credibility on the labor market of the graduates.

ARACIS Council performed thorough SWOT analysis, in order to plan ahead all the changes needed to enhance the internal and external quality of the agency, thus playing a major role in the development of the quality culture in Romanian HE system.

2.2 - Development of external quality assurance processes

Standard: The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

Guidelines: In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used.

As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

ARACIS Compliance

The Romanian legislation, methodology and ARACIS guides create an extensive set of documentation on which the ARACIS QA-activities are built. The ARACIS Methodology is focused on the external evaluation. ARACIS Guides (http://www.aracis.ro/en/procedures/), made available to the institutions, offer significant practical information on the procedures for quality evaluation, emphasising the evaluation of learning outcomes as well as on a broader set of other standards and outcomes of institutional teaching and learning activities, making thus a big difference from the previous approach which was focused mostly on inputs. This observation refers obviously to both internal and external evaluation processes, requiring HEIs to make operational the new approach, and for external evaluators to really consider the implications of focusing on outcomes. By publishing the Law, the Methodology and the ARACIS Guide, and by providing universities with the whole set of documents containing the aims and objectives of quality assurance processes, which has enabled them to develop their internal QA departments and procedures, clarity and transparency of procedures and methods is assured. It important to stress out the fact that all those documents were constantly improved over the last years and were also translated into English, published and made available to evaluation panels in order to facilitate the activity of the foreign evaluators. Training procedures for evaluators, including student evaluators, were developed and improved and are consistently applied.

Periodical meetings with university leadership and staff responsible with QA in universities were organized between 2008 and 2011, especially under the ACADEMIS Project. Several training sessions for internal evaluators coming from accredited HEIs were organized. The speakers selected for the trainings were the most experienced external evaluators of ARACIS, thus setting common bases for reporting and communication between the evaluators and the academic structures which were evaluated (study programs or institutions). This initiative was welcomed

by the institutions as bureaucracy is very much reduced and interference with current activities of institutions was reduced. However, there is a common understanding of ARACIS and institutions that this process should continue. To this end, ARACIS is implementing its own electronic platform for data collection supported financially from EU structural funds.

Also, during the training sessions and dissemination meetings held periodically, ARACIS took into account the importance of the input of different stakeholders, such as employers. ARACIS invited all interested parties to attend those meetings, thus creating a favorable path of coomunication between HEIs and the employers. Therefore, in order to insure **participation of stakeholders** in view to incorporate views from outside the academic community the agency took action and organized its own Standing commission of employers, including members representing different sectors of the economic and social activity, such as engineering, economists etc. The members of the Standing commission of the employers are already participating in evaluation of some Licenta study programs and this activity will be extended to Master and Doctoral programs. Now, as the completion of the self-certification of the National Framework of Qualifications (2011) in higher education this activity is continuing with the aim of ensuring beeter co-ordination of the expected and achieved learning outcomes of study programmes with the vision of the employers.

2.3 - Criteria for decisions

Standard: Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

Guidelines: Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

ARACIS Compliance

The criteria for decisions have been disseminated and widely debated, being in accordance to the mission statement of the agency of assessing the quality of study programs and institutions. Evidence based views are to be expressed by the external evaluators and both the criteria and the documentation necessary for the evaluation are referred to in the contract signed with the externally evaluated HEI. The analysis is based on the SER and on the results of a site visit. There are several steps in making a final decision.

Evaluation of study programs (Licenta -Bachelor)

The panel of program evaluators (three members, one of the evaluators is member of the permanent specialty commission) receive and study the SER before the site visit. Following the site-visit they present in writing to the permanent specialty commission the results and facts

found during the site-visit, in which agreement between the self-evaluation report and reality is of crucial importance. The permanent specialty commission includes uneven number (usually nine) representatives of a study domain. The role of the permanent specialty commission is very important for the *consistency of the decisions*, as the same study program can be initiated or already currently offered by several HEIs. This commission judges and decides also whether or not if the activities and interaction with the representatives of the university during the visit closely followed the correct procedures, evaluates the consistency of the documents with the conclusions of the visit report and makes a proposal based on the findings and recommendations of the panel and on its own scrutiny of the documents and facts. The report is then forwarded to the Department of accreditation, which verifies and validates the procedure, and then is presented to the Council.

The ARACIS Council examines the report, the processes and procedures and takes the final decision. The presentation in the Council is meant to contribute to moderating conclusions, if necessary. The decision of the Council is made known to the institution, then sent to the Ministry of National Education and made public. There is also in place a procedure of appeals against a final decision, open to a HEI which is not satisfied with the procedures or the decision. In this case, according to the nature of the appeal, a new panel, including other evaluators, may be requested to examine the contents of the appeal letter and may proceed with an additional evaluation. When this second evaluation is completed, the panel informs the Council about the conclusion, which validates the final decision. For study program evaluation, three levels of judgments on confidence remain in place, as they have proven to describe with reasonable accuracy the differences in quality: **confidence**, **limited confidence** and **no confidence**.

Evaluation of study programs (Master)

Evaluation of Master study programs was performed following the same principles, with two evaluators performing the sit-visit. This difference is justified by the fact that institutions are allowed to initiate or run master level study programs only if they have already in place accredited Licenta level study programs, which is considered to be in itself an evidence of the institutional capability of the stydy domain in terms of staff, resources etc. Now, a new legal provision requires evaluation of master programs and Master study domains, following a procedure which is not yes finalized but work is in progress to this end. The agency has proposed a draft form to the Ministry of National Education, which is currently examining it in order to finalize together with ARACIS the final form to be approved by Government decision, according to the legal provisions.

Evaluation of higher education institutions

For the institutional evaluations, the visit panel is larger and includes institutional evaluators and study program evaluators for a minimum of 20% of study programs selected from the total number of accredited programs offered by the HEI. The work of the visit panel, including student-evaluators, and foreign evaluators include examination of the evidence against the information contained in the self-evaluation report, recording this evidence, writing conclusions and reporting. The experts' panel comprises also one scientific secretary of the panel, who assists

the evaluators in the process and is usually one of the professional staff of the agency. The institution is informed in writing by a comprehensive letter about the findings and preliminary conclusions of the evaluation and is given the possibility to react, also in writing, in a specified time interval. As part of the procedure for moderating conclusions, the documents, including all the reports, are forwarded to the Department of external quality assurance evaluation which verifies and validates the procedure and drafts its own report, which integrates the findings of the evaluators, including the students and the foreign experts. All the documents are then presented to the Council. The ARACIS Council examines the reports, the processes and procedures and takes the final decision. The final report of the Council and the decisions, including the level of confidence (or "judgment") awarded to the institution and to the study programs which were evaluated are shared with the institution and made public on the ARACIS website together with the specific follow-up procedures. The decision of the Council is shared with the institution, is sent to the Ministry of National Education and made public. Within the ACADEMIS project, where 46 accredited HEIs were externally evaluated, a brochure was published for each of these universities and was distributed both to the HEIs, some copies being kept into the ARACIS library. At the same time, these brochures were published on the ARACIS website.

A difficult task following an external evaluation proved to be that of formulating the final judgment with regard to external confidence in institutional quality. Initially the Methodology included three levels of judgments on confidence for institutional evaluations: high degree of confidence, limited degree of confidence and lack of confidence. These three levels of confidence proved not to be differentiating enough, neglecting many nuances and variations.

This derived form the fact that quality is a comprehensive concept which may take certain shapes and values when the institution as a whole is considered. Variations are even more important when study programs and research performance are also brought into the framework. In order to cope with this situation, the Council of ARACIS decided to use four levels of judgments on confidence, starting with external evaluations which were initiated in 2009: **high degree of confidence**; **confidence; limited degree of confidence** and **lack of confidence**.

The appeals procedures have been more clearly described, as it can be found in the ***Part III – Academic quality external evaluation of accredited higher education institution***, published on the website of the agency

Another aspect that needs to be stressed-out is the fact that, acknowledging the importance of even more consistent evaluations, as the study programs and HEIs are more and more complex these days, the ARACIS Council developed also the inter-panel consultation, and a new Methodology was drafted and proposed to the Ministry of National Education within the ACADEMIS project, which is more qualitative and learning outcomes oriented than the previous.

For all ARACIS external evaluations it is very important to make sure that the conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner. Even though the preliminary reports are drafted by groups of different people, the Departments of accreditation and of External quality evaluation of the agency are consulted, before the proposals for both study programs and/or institutional

evaluations are presented to the Council for the final judgment. The draft-report of the corresponding Department is presented to the ARACIS Council for analysis and endorsement. After being discussed and approved by the Council the report is made public.

2.4 - Processes fit for purpose

Standard: All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Guidelines: Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- *insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task*
- *the exercise of care in the selection of experts*
- *the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts*
- *the use of international experts*
- *participation of students*
- *ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached*
- *the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review*
- *recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality*

ARACIS Compliance

According to the law, the general objective of the activity of ARACIS is to assure and improve the quality of the Romanian higher education system, in order to make Romanian diplomas trustworthy in Europe and internationnaly. The quality assurance system consists of self evaluation reports, site visits, accreditation reports and decisions and tries to go even furthet in reaching this objective.

The aims and objectives set for ARACIS by the Law determine the nature and content of the processes and activities which were designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve them.

As presented before, the activities of ARACIS include, according to the Law:

- **institutional Quality Assurance evaluation**, which is either periodic (every five years) for accredited institutions or in view of accrediting an institution provisionally authorized to function/provisionnaly authorizing a new institution to enable it to start functioning as higher

education provider; (nine evaluations in progress actually and 95 evaluations performed during the 2008-2012 period for periodic (cyclical) evaluation and three evaluations for institutional accreditation);

- **study programs evaluation, which is either periodic** (cyclical - every five years) or for accreditation/provisional authorizing as a first stage of accreditation for Licenta level study programs;

- **study programs evaluation for provisional authorization and accreditation**;

- **master programs accreditation;**

- **study programs for teacher training** in higher education institutions, in view of accreditation and evaluation.

The processes and activities are differentiated in order to best fit their purposes. In the same time, whereas the structure of criteria and quality standards is specified by the Law, the Methodology in use is fitted for purpose accordingly, keeping into account the differences between the types of evaluations. For instance, additional performance indicators are specified for accreditation, most of them related to teaching staff, the eligibility for accreditation of Bachelor programs needs a longer time interval after provisional authorizing and they are associated with a special follow-up monitoring and reporting activity.

The role of evaluators is of outmost importance in this process. ***The provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts was offered by several periodic*** training sessions organized by ARACIS (Annex 14) for academic experts under the framework of the ACADEMIS project or supported from the own resources of the agency.

As already stated, ARACIS has already organized, starting in 2008 and continuing in the follwing four years, extensive training sessions for its own listed evaluators (experts) and, in addition, trained also 300 internal evaluators (at university level, as part of creating a quality culture, to improve the quality of QA activities and quality of self-evaluation reports for programs and at institutional level). An electronic tool has been developed for on-line evaluation of Romanian experts, in preparation for the intense activity over the last years.

To improve quality, of both the external evaluators listed in the Register of external evaluators of ARACIS and the internal evaluators, ARACIS published a *Manual for evaluating quality of university study programs (Manualul evaluatorului calitatii programelor de studii universitare)* authored by leading experts from ARACIS Register of evaluators. The external evaluators followed several training sessions supported by the agency from its own resources and from the abovementioned ACADEMIS project. For the the training sessions purposes, a 687 pages *Course support for the training sessions of evaluators* was published, authored by 32 ARACIS leading evaluators and members of permanent Speciality commissions) and was made available in Romanian to the participants in printed form and on the website. At these trainings were

present as trainees, both students and academic evaluators, as well as representatives of stakeholders from the professional field.

An electronic facility has been developed and implemented which allows the agency to test the level of understanding of the QA procedures of the agency of all the external evaluators, local and from abroad, who expresses the wish to take part in evaluation of study programs and higher education institutions. Following this testing, which took place in electronic form, in three sessions (one month each), the number of evaluators in the register is now of 1333 (see http://pfe.aracis.ro/cms/). After a period in which the content was improved, the platform was recently re-opened and made available to applicants.

ARACIS also implements presently a European funded Project - *EEducation system for quality evaluation in Romanian higher education – SeECIS*, an EEducation system that will allow the conception and presentation of a curriculum updating in a digital form (specific for ARACIS activities, as a result of the tasks presented in the current legislation) and on-line/off-line access to these materials. The overall pbjective of the project is to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of training those involved in the process of external assessment of the quality in higher education: external evaluators, members of specialized committees, ARACIS Council, ARACIS staff and persons from the universities involved in this process. *The overall objective will be achieved by:*

- Increasing of the training effectiveness: specific eEducation techniques for teaching and testing the knowledge, the possibility of automatic return or at student's initiative on course materials, increasing flexibility of course scenarios, easy access to related concepts, increase interactivity between course participants (in case of synchronicity - virtual classroom).
- Increasing the training efficiency: developing multiple use of course materials without additional consumption, facilitating and simplifying access to learning methods without an instructor, distance education, asynchronous methods of training.
- Increasing transparency of external evaluation processes of ARACIS

As a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance and, in order to become more relevant and competitive at international level, *the use of international experts is current practice.* They are briefed in advance on the procedures, criteria, standards and performance indicators of used by the agency as well on the importance of understanding the local context. The SER is also made available to them with one month before the evaluation mssion starts. International experts participate in all external quality assurance evaluation missions at institutional level. Their findings are included in the panel report and are also published as a full independent document.

The selection of evaluators (experts) is performed based on their competence and appropriate skills, which are the result of individual study of the legal provisions, ARACIS Methodology and Guide, participation at training sessions organized by ARACIS. The activity of the experts is permanently monitored and verified, and the results have already led to a number of changes in

the composition of the visit panels and of the permanent specialty commissions. Further monitoring of the skills of evaluators (experts) is being performed by using the aforementioned electronic tool.

At the same time, *stakeholders* and *students* are included in the evaluation panels. ARACIS is in permanent contact with the student organizations with the aim to organize joint training sessions including students and faculty evaluators. The mentioned training sessions for students and professors were partly organized in joint induction seminars, allowing thus to build trust and connections between the two groups of evaluators.

Student unions organize also their training sessions for which ARACIS provides support in terms of funding some activities and sending Council members and experts as speakers.

The subjects of the training sessions and of the electronic facilities for the evaluators are based on the concept of *the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review.* The afore-mentioned improvement of the electronic platform for evaluators was meant to up-date the practical example included, including a "model SER" with more relevance.
The training hands-on sessions for evaluators, academics, students or employers, were designed and run to *ensure that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached.*

During the last period ARACIS work insisted towards strengthening the culture of **institutional improvement and enhancement**, and all elements of the QA-processes (indicators, self evaluation reports, evaluators etc.) were oriented to his aim. Stakeholders like employers play now a greater role in the evaluation and QA process and the criteria and guides have been constantly reviewed and improved.

The most relevant evidence in the sense of **recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality** is the result of follow-up external evaluation procedures meant to identify the outcome of correction measures taken at the level of study program/institutions in order to enhance quality and, if sustained by adequate proof, to improve the judgment on the level of quality. Following additional evaluation, a number of more than 200 study programs and 13 universities proved that their initial their quality judgment fulfilled the conditions for being improved (for instance, for study programs, from limited degree of confidence to confidence etc.).

2.5 - Reporting
Standard: Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

Guidelines: In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended

readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations.

There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions.

Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.

ARACIS Compliance

Any QA evaluation is followed by a report which is initially drafted by the panel of evaluators, analyzed by the permanent specialty commission for all the study programs belonging to the study domain, in order to make sure that the report is consistent, based on evidence and structured as to cover description, analysis, conclusions and recommendations. Since reporting is closely related to criteria for decision, a quite detailed description of the sequence of reporting procedure has been already introduced at ESG 2.3. All the reports discussed and endorsed by the ARACIS Council are sent to the evaluated HEIs and then made public in written form and on the ARACIS website. In written form, a copy is also sent to the Ministry of National Education and a press release is also made public. Reports following an institutional evaluation were also published as brochures in a relevant number of copies. Program reports in written form cannot be published as brochures due to prohibitive cost constraints, since there are in very large numbers (at the moment this self-evaluation report was written the total of study programs evaluated is of more than 5700 (See Annex 7). The fact that this situation was probably not very clearly explained has lead to a statement included in one previous external evaluation report include the observation that not all the reports are published but they are made available only on request. This is obviously not the case, because all the reports are immediately made public in electronic form, which can be found on the ARACIS website at any time. This procedure has been judged by the academic community and the public as an acceptable solution because raising the costs of evaluation to cope with higher and higher printing costs would reflect in the level of evaluation fees paid by the institutions themselves for programs.

It is stipulated by Law that the report and the decision should be firstly communicated to the HEI, which can appeal them in certain respects. This is done by ARACIS for both program and institutional evaluations. When the report and the decision are finalized, they are made public and transmitted to the Ministry of National Education for legal follow-up. Normally, not later than the end of month of May of each year, the Ministry publishes the list of provisionally authorized and accredited HEIs and study programs to inform HE candidates before the students' admission period for the next academic year.

Over the last period of time, ARACIS re-analized its reporting policy and procedures and included in the trainings of the evaluators elements on how to write a report, to make reports more "reader friendly" and accessible to the wide public. As already stated in this report, one major achievement is the fact that for institutional evaluations, which are more complex, additional technical support was created by the appointment of the scientific secretaries, which led to a more consistent procedure of the report-writing process, making sure that all the evaluators contribute to the panel report which is drafted in the final form by the panel co-ordinator. As mentioned before, all documents are available on the website of the agency, which has lead to a quite satisfactory situation where there were no complaints about the contents of the reports from both authors and readers.

Reports following system-wide analyses were drafted and published under the framework of the ACADEMIS project. These include topics such as: A Synthetic Image: Indicators and Scores, Academic Statistics, Distribution of Perceptions about Higher Education, Gaps and Differences in Education Quality, Gaps and Differences on Perspectives and Relations, Representations on ARACIS etc. It is noteworthy to mention that the reports include not only facts and figures but also elements which are meant to improve the quality assurance activity of both externally evaluated institutions or of the Agency. Self-criticism included in the reports aims to stimulate development of internal quality assurance procedures of the Agency and improve fitness-for-purpose.

In order to make more accessibile and usefulness the external evaluation reports and also the informations provided by the universities for the external evaluation (institutional or study programme), ARACIS developed also a database with following: specifications **Input indicators,** for institution resources: Human resources; Logistics; Financial resources; **Process indicators,** for educational, research and administrative processes (i.e. educational technologies, academic counseling services etc.); **Output indicators,** which estimate the results of the educational, research and administrative processes (i.e. the number of degrees issued, the number of invention patents or papers published in academic journals etc.); **Outcome indicators,** which estimate the results and impact of the activity of the higher education institutions (i.e. effects on the labor market, increased productivity in a specific economic sector etc.).

2.6- Follow up-procedures

Standard: Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Guidelines: Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: it should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up

procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

ARACIS Compliance

The Law and the ARACIS Methodology and Guide provide for ARACIS the task to set follow-up procedures and demands for the implementation of recommendations. Following the periodic (cyclical) evaluation of a HEI, when the situation demands it, according to paragraph 3.2, d in the Methodology, the recommendations could be followed-up by a "work plan" which is initially drafted by the HEI and then agreed upon with the ARACIS panel and Council. The "work plan" has specific provisions and deadlines for implementation. The duration of implementation is at least one academic year, and during this period ARACIS is required also to nominate a visit panel and visit the HEI. The new evaluation is of a summative type and focuses specifically on how the recommendations have been implemented. In case of a HEI failing to implement them in due time, as specified by the law, ARACIS informs the Ministry of National Education, which takes decisions according to the legislation.

In other cases, when the Ministry has been notified by the Agency about the outcome of an evaluation which clearly demonstrates that an HE institution has repeatedly failed to meet quality standards, or at its own ministerial initiative - following other types of information (press releases, complaints, judiciary action etc.), ARACIS can be asked to proceed with special monitoring procedures for a specified time interval. Currently, ARACIS provided such procedures for two higher education institutions.

De facto, monitoring quality assurance activities by ARACIS is permanent also because the evaluation of the programs is not performed in the same time. The time sequencing of study programs evaluations throughout the whole period between successive institutional external evaluations is such that most institutions are visited, at a period of 3-4 months, by an evaluation panel from ARACIS, which focuses at least on one particular study program. In such occasion, the university is also asked to provide data about the internal processes of quality assurance at institutional level. Thus, institutional cyclical re-evaluation focuses primarily on value-added and the functioning of internal quality assurance system.

In the same time, every year, according to the law, universities produce an internal quality assurance report and an analysis of the previous report, from the point of view of institutional and program levels. ARACIS evaluation commissions check the existence and implementation of these reports, as a proof of real functionality of the internal quality assurance system.

Since 2009, regular meetings of ARACIS Council members with university representatives take place, organized in different parts of the country. The goal of these meetings was to disseminate the results at system level, to discuss about certain problems faced by universities in

implementing measure plans, in order to ensure continuity of internal quality assurance process. These meetings were very well appreciated by universities and they requested ARACIS to continue this activity. In the "follow-up" process, ARACIS focuses on the quality of "partnership" in its relationship with the universities.

Thus, further meetings with institutional or program representatives are organized also in institutions which, after external evaluation, have obtained either High degree of confidence or Confidence. These meetings can embrace several forms: formal short site-visit after three years from the date the Report was made public, participation of ARACIS at academic or research events organized by the institution, meetings with the university leaders with ARACIS representatives etc. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged. When appropriate, some of the recommendations are of an informal type: request for supplementary information, minor corrections in curricula and staffing, etc.

Even when the quality judgment was "Confidence", the institution can apply for a second evaluation, within the time interval between the legal one (cycle: five years), in order to up-grade it, namely to High degree of confidence.

Following institutional evaluations and based on the rating obtained, 13 of the higher education institutions have been evaluated twice during 2008-2013 as the procedure required or upon their own request, not all of them being however able to obtain a higher rating.

With regard to accreditation, once a HEI or a study program has been *provisionally authorized* (as the first stage of accreditation, according to the Law), the institution or the study program is subject to an annual monitoring process, including drafting and sending ARACIS the aforementioned annual internal quality assurance reports. After a period of time of two years after graduation of the first promotion, the educational provider which is authorized must request accreditation and is obliged by the Law to follow the procedure leading to the granting (or not) of the status of accreditation. The follow-up is thus on-going, permanent and aims for constant quality enhancement.

2.7 - Periodic reviews

Standard: External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

Guidelines: Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not 'once in a lifetime'. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodicly renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external

quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

ARACIS Compliance

As previously mentioned, according to the Law, the accredited HEIs are legally bound to an external quality evaluation every five years (periodic, cyclical review). This process started already in fall 2006, with drafting and approving the Methodology, and in 2007 the first nine state universities and two private ones were evaluated externally by ARACIS. In fall 2008 ARACIS starting implementing a project funded from the European structural funds, under which in the period 2008-2011 were externally evaluated 46 accredited HEIs (37 public universities and 9 private universities) on a voluntary basis. The activities performed as part of this project consolidated the ARACIS approaches, expertise, communication with universities, on one side, and, on the other side, strenghtened quality culture in universities by implication of many other university staff, not only the institutional leadership. In addition to those evaluations, other institutional evaluation processes were performed, raising the total number of completed institutional evaluations to 81.

The review (evaluation) procedures in place, corresponding to the Law and Methodology, have been made public and discussed with the HE institutions.

Also, the process of evaluating the study programs which have been authorized and/or accredited by ARACIS over the last years, on the basis of the current Methodology is continuing

The periodicity of the evaluation of the study programs is related with the rating obtained. The normal cyclical period is every five years, but ARACIS took the decision that for some programs which do not meet the quality criteria or that have not achieved a certain level of progress, in accordance to the mission and potential of the institution, a new evaluation should be performed within a two years period.

According with the Law of National Education, the evaluation of Master cycle should also include evaluation of Master domains, every five years. ARACIS proposed to Ministry of National Education a new Methodology for Master domains evaluation. It is expected that ARACIS will start soon this new activity. Cyclical Master programs evaluation continues to be part of periodical institutional evaluation and in this way ARACIS re-evaluated a large number of Master programs.

At the same time, ARACIS is partner in another EU funded project dealing with the analysis of internationalized master programs, implemented by Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. The aim of this project is to try to develop two major tools, both for ARACIS and the universities, such as the establishment of specific criteria to be met, alongside the general ones, by all master programs that will carry the "internationalized" mention, as well as the establishment of internal evaluation tools for the higher education institutions that intend to offer such master programs.

2.8 - System-wide analysis

Standard: Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analyzing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments, etc.

Guidelines: All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

ARACIS Compliance

By law, ARACIS has to perform such an analysis every three years. The development of the **system–wide analyses** started in 2009. The first "Quality Assurance Barometer – the Status of Quality in Romanian higher education" was made public in November 2009, the second "Barometer" in January 2011 and the final and third one in November 2011. Also, the yearly reports of the agency include reference to the results of institutional and study program evaluation at system level. The results are made public through publications, participation to quality assurance Forums and conferences as well as in regional Conferences organized to this end in different academic centers. In 2011 seven such events were organized for all 110 accredited universities, under the ACADEMIS project, disseminating the results of the first enterprise of this kind. The results were discussed in view of suggestions from the participants for improving the methodology and for better internal QA procedures within universities to build-up a real quality culture. Based on that, ARACIS has already developed a database, with informations from 46 universities already evaluated in the ACADEMIS Project, which will be extended to all the accredited HEIs in Romania. The data specifications are the following: **Input indicators,** for institution resources: Human resources; Logistics; Financial resources; **Process indicators,** for educational, research and administrative processes (i.e. educational technologies, academic counseling services etc.); **Output indicators,** which estimate the results of the educational, research and administrative processes (i.e. the number of degrees issued, the number of invention patents or papers published in academic journals etc.); **Outcome indicators,** which estimate the results and impact of the activity of the higher education institutions (i.e. effects on the labor market, increased productivity in a specific economic sector etc.).

The current European-funded project *EEducation system for quality evaluation in Romanian higher education – SeECIS* which is being implemented by ARACIS will allow for much more extended data collection in view of developing further research on the evolution of QA exercise outcomes in universities. The resulting information would pave the way for improved and hopefully simplified ARACIS external evaluation methodology and better connection with the

National Qualification Framework in HE in terms of defining improved Learing Outcomes based curricula.

4. Final Remarks and Considerations

The scope of this SER is mainly, as expected, to provide the ENQA co-ordinated panel with information enabling the members to judge upon the level of compliance of the agency to the ESG but also on the progress achieved from the first external evaluation of the agency. However, the ARACIS Council decided to include not only facts and descriptions of procedures but also a self-critical view of the activity of the agency with the aim to let the panel judge upon the availability and wish of ARACIS to improve its procedures based on a SWOT exercise.

4.1 Quality, Quality Assurance and the ESG: an ARACIS view

Defining **quality,** both of education and within education, is not a simple task. Definitions of quality education given by educators, scholars, students, employers or other different stakeholders are significantly different. Not to speak of those given by people involved in setting standard used in the economic life, who have a more specific, product and conformity oriented vision, which is yet another source of potential conflict. During the last half of the decade or even more, since ARACIS started to function, the system-wide analysis performed on the Romanian HE system allowed the definition of some patterns and approaches regarding quality, from different stakeholders involved in or touched by the education process, as follows:

- **From the parents/families points of view,** all responsible parents want for their children the best schools and the best teachers and generally all of us would like to benefit of „the best". Yet, the question that imposes is what „the best" is? How can we be sure that we really chose „the best"?

- **The teacher's input into the quality approach is of paramount importance.** Since education implies personal involvement of the teacher, her/his perception of the quality of higher education is inherently influenced from the very beginning by the binomial „expectations – reality" she/he is confronted to. Many students and in general each person strive to become the best, to perform in education, in his/her profession, personal life etc. To be honest with ourselves, in this first confrontation how often expectations of the learner are overtaken by reality?

- On the other hand, as fas as **the institution** is concerned, under the influence of the quest for excellence, as well as of other factors, such the economic factor, the public opinion, mass media etc., higher education institutions became more and more concerned with the on-going discussions about definition and role of quality. Any indication that they might not be top-quality institutions or that they are poorly ranked in one of the many „*league tables*" or „*rankings*" is considered of be an attempt to their status and therefore a direct prejudice brought to them.

- At the same time, **employers** have a different approach on that matter, depending on the size of the company. If small businesses prefer to hire "specialized" or even "experienced!"graduates, for the larger enterprises it matters more the general learning outcomes/skills of graduates. They are willing to see both education and training more flexible and more open for innovation, thus enhancing relationships between skills suppliers and employers, giving priority to the development of institutional leadership, capacity building and quality improvement efforts.

- **The decision-makers/governments.** One common playground of discussion which emerges and permanently re-emerges at national and/or EU level is the „Efficiency of Higher Education". Although the concept of „*efficiency of HE*" is not clearly defined (in the paper of the EC - *Country Fiche on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Public Expenditure on Tertiary Education* only examples of „in-efficiency are proposed and all come from pre-university education!), it considers almost an exclusive economic parameter. In that sense, quality of HE has a beneficial effect on the quality of highly trained workforce in the EU – including by research, and contributes to the economic development of the EU. Who would dare to flatly challenge this assumption? But, is this everything about the role of quality assurance in higher education? In the end, what education do we want? The Chilean scholar Eugenio Tironi in his book „*El Sueno Chileno*" (The Chilean Dream) relates the answer to "the kind of society we want".

Once quality of higher education is defined, or some definition of it is accepted, **quality assurance** must be seen as a process leading to quality.

Some answers on what should then be made to lead to a better understanding of the role of **quality assurance** in higher education and these could be given by starting from the purposes of higher education. The Recommendation Rec (2007) 6 by the Committee of Ministers to member states of the Council of Europe, on the public responsibility for higher education and research, prepared by the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR), points to four main purposes of higher education:

- preparation for sustainable employment;

- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

These are the overall purposes of higher education and research. In the European Higher Education Area characterized by the diversity and the autonomy of its institutions, each institution may fulfill one or more of a wide range of missions and it may do so at varying levels and degrees.

On the other hand, the dynamics of society induce changes, new requirements and expectations, need for adaptation to fluid realities much over shorter time intervals as before. This is why, the process of encouraging diversity, creativity and curricular innovation, may be carried out by moving the focus from external evaluation to the *internal adoption of quality and to external assistance for quality enhancement*.

Revising the quality assurance philosophy is also necessary. It would be desirable for the *quality-policing* principle to coexist with the *quality enhancement* principle and for the latter to gradually become dominant as the internal institutionalisation of quality increases.

ARACIS is willing to contribute to the work of the E4, co-ordinated by ENQA, to improve the ESG.

ARACIS's functions could thus change gradually from the *hard* ones, focused on control procedures, to *softer* functions, focused more on facilitation and elaboration of recommendations, presentation of good practices etc. rather than control.

Concrete measures would include:

- revising the methodology of external evaluation by ensuring: decentralisation and more focus on *quality enhancement* and less on control; auditing internal quality assurance systems, encouraging and supporting universities in establishing such systems;

- technical assistance from ARACIS in professionalising quality assurance services at university level: training sessions, promoting good practices, assistance in designing quality assurance instruments etc. Thus, ARACIS would undertake to a considerable extent the role of a quality facilitator;

- external evaluations should more and more take into consideration outcomes, but without considering them as the only evidence or substitute of other criteria which determine quality of education.

4.2 SWOT analysis of ARACIS – summary of main findings

The SWOT self-analysis performed by ARACIS, identifyied a number or strong points, of weak points and also some other external factors and weaknesses, which, although independent of ARACIS can represent additional threats. The agency hopes that, if considered with care and in co-operation with HE institutions and other decision factors thay could be be turned into benefic opportunities.

Strengths :

- National and International recognition of ARACIS, through membership of ENQA, INQAAHEE, CEENQA;

- ARACIS is listed in the EQAR;

- Independence and self-financing;

- Participation and involvement in EU-funded projects, both as beneficiary and as a partner;

- Clear mission, defined and reinforced by the law; ARACIS benefits of a competent Management Team, which allowed the agency to achieve a high level of experience and be involved in many international collaborations. At the same time, throughout the academic activities of the Council members and of the technical staff, the institution is connected round the clock to the realities of the academic world and more and more open to partners form the academic world. The agency holds now **systematic data** on main stakeholders' opinions and perceptions on quality. The objective, empirical data on universities allows for a future more consistent benchmarking exercise and supports now the proposals for improving the current methodology.

The system evaluation provided a **framework for wide consultation** with experts in universities in order to improve the existing methodology and reduce the administrative burden of the external evaluation exercise for both institutions and agency. In many universities the quality assurance procedures, internal and external, contributed to **enhancement of quality**. The most relevant evidence in that sense is the result of follow-up external evaluation procedures meant to identify the outcome of correction measures taken at the level of study program/institutions in order to enhance quality and, if sustained by adequate proof, to improve the judgment on the level of quality. Following additional evaluation, a number of more than 200 study programs and 9 universities proved that their initial their quality judgment fulfilled the conditions for being improved (for instance, for study programs, from "limited degree of confidence" to "confidence" etc.).

- Involvement of students in the evaluation process and good collaboration with the students organizations The active participation of students in external institutional evaluations has contributed to a very high extent to the confidence-building process in quality assurance from the student side. The objective, independent, evaluation of student members of the panels contributed to the quality of reporting and final decision.

- Involvement of employers in the evaluation process and good collaboration with the employers organizations;

- The large number of external evaluators within the National Register of Evaluators;

- Clear procedures for the evaluation, according the ESG, applied in equal measure to the state higher education institutions as well as to the private ones;

- Transparency of decisions, both at the level of study programs as well as the institutional level;

- Positive image at the regional, national and international level. The presence and active **participation of international experts** in institutional external evaluations opened new perspectives for judging quality, especially in the definition of the institutional mission, resources and management;

- Contribution to the development of a "quality culture" in universities - increasing the internal systems role of quality assurance

Weaknesses

The weak point refer also to the *HE education system*, as they were reflected in the Quality barometers, as well as to the *Agency,* since they have to be considered together in order to allow further corrective and developmental measures.

The **weak points** identified in the **HE system** are usually easier to identify and describe than the strong ones. Understanding the reason for their existence and identifying the methods for reducing and/or eliminating them is one of the scopes of the agency, requiring however a certain time to implement the adequate correction measures.

The quality barometers claimed a low level of differentiation among universities with regard to mission, strategies and quality assurance procedures and a high degree of homogeneity and institutional isomorphism in internal organization. In that respect, the agency found some objective reasons, such as because subject-specific universities (i.e. medical, military, technical etc.) are more homogeneous than comprehensive universities, the legislative framework at the moment the "barometers" were drafted etc.

Regarding quality assurance, in many cases the focus in the institutions was on drafting dossiers for accreditation and/or periodic evaluation, inducing formalism and ritualism in the internal quality assurance practices in institutions. The quality assurance practices have not been fully internalized, in many situations remaining decoupled from the teaching/learning and research current activities in the universities. Whereas the involvement of students is achieved in the

external evaluation, the agency found it to a much lesser degree in the internal quality assurance procedures.

SERs of higher education institutions still remain too "self-laudative," instead of showing an understanding of the role of self-criticism concepts for QA and the quality enhancement activities.

In many universities internal quality cultures have not yet fully emerged, but rather counter-cultures blaming the excessive bureaucratization of academic activities and indicating a sort of "quality assurance fatigue". Quality assurance is in some places seen mostly a technical bureaucratic activity - not embedded in the day-to-day routines and practices of the universities or study programs. This shows that many higher education institutions do not demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes.

The **weak points** identified at the **agency** are summarized as follows.

- Lack of uniform distribution of the attributions at technical staff level: differences in the work-load of some compartments within the ARACIS organizational chart;

- The Methodology and Guide need to be revised and improved: the action in in progress;

- The activity of evaluators was not always as satisfactory as expected;

- Internal procedures not yet fully finalised and applied;

- Smaller number of evaluators in some study domains in the National Register of Evaluators;

- Insufficient space to conduct some activities, especially parrallel meetings;
- Insufficient space for the archive.

Opportunities

- International opening through collaborations and exchanges of experiences with other agencies of quality assurance in higher education, as well as potential involvment in other international projects;

- Opening to the labor market through collaborations with professional organizations;

- Ability to develop European funded projects;

- Alignment to the requirements of the international accounting and to the accounting of European funds public institutions – for Accountability Department;

- Opportunity to exchange good practice with and to support other quality assurance agencies.

Threats

- Legislative changes;

- Quality assurance „fatigue" in universities;

- Attempts of local authorities/politicians to support the local HE institutions with their „influence";

- Insufficient funding of HE.

4.3. Priorities for improvement

Improving the quality level of ARACIS activities remains a major goal, although a great deal has been achieved already.

Specification of quality standards is to be further developed, as the Law formulates the domains and criteria of concerns for QA. ARACIS and HEIs consider the standards and performance indicators (PI) as: (a) representing reference points for institutional quality management; (b) offering a framework for collecting information, maintaining databases and processing information which HEIs can use for internal monitoring and external demonstration of QA; (c) providing ARACIS with references in the process of external evaluation as Standards and PI should be closely related in each HEI with the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (RNCIS).

In the future, a more balanced set of performance indicators is needed, focusing mostly on processes of quality assurance (internal management of quality at all levels, study programs, faculties, institution) and outputs (learning outcomes, scientific production), related to inputs as conditionalities (staffing, teaching/learning environment).

Setting new QA evaluation principles is a longer term goal of the agency, to be implemented in accordance with a confidence-building process in Romanian Higher education.

This will demand a **shift of focus** in the activity and in its perception in the eyes of all paaticipants and stakeholders: from quality control or monitoring (as external evaluation is still perceived, mostly by the public and even by some authorities and the mass-media) to *quality enhancement*.

Therefore, a more balanced relationship shall be developed between *Compulsory normative minimal requirements* (useful mostly for accreditation) and and enhanced *fitness-for-purpose* approach (for periodical evaluation) with focus on a "*benchmarking* approach". The benchmarking approach is seen as meeting of threshold indicators' level – as a result of institutional and inter-institutional comparisons.

Benchmarking will be a dynamic process based on the current performance of Romanian universities, in correlation with European trends and benchmarks. With benchmarking reagarded

as a quality enhancement tool, universities and study programs will be encouraged to gather systematic data and to set internal reference points – intra-institutional or intra-programe comparisons. Universities will be encouraged to reflect on the strenghts and weaknesses and to take remedial decisions on the basis of evidence.

Periodical (cyclical) evaluation will be in the longer run mostly focused on the audit of the internal quality system (process) and quality enhancement. The institutions will be thus encouraged to assume full responsibility for assuring quality and also to involve stakeholders so as to assure the validity of their study programmes. We hope the conditions for the direct application of this project will be there after a second round of external evaluations of HE institutions will be completed.

The performance indicators will take into account more and more parameters such as "learning outcomes", although the agency is aware of the danger of reducing quality assurance to evaluations based simply on output/oucome data.

In conclusion we believe that our vision for quality of higher education is to focus on *building better systems to give all stakeholders what they expect in terms of quality of education, to stimulate research and to reduce brain drain.*