

Translation from Romanian

**THE ROMANIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

RQAAHE

**QUALITY EVALUATION ACTIVITIES GUIDE
FOR UNIVERSITY STUDY PROGRAMMES AND
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

**PART III
EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC QUALITY IN
ACCREDITED HIGHER EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS
(EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION)**

DECEMBER 2006

The external evaluation of academic quality is carried out in the following situations:

- a) for the *temporary functioning authorisation of a study programme* (programme authorisation) or of a *higher education service provider* (institutional authorisation)**
- b) for the *accreditation of a study programme* (programme accreditation) or of a *higher education institution* (institutional accreditation)**
- c) for the *periodical certification, every five years, of the academic quality of education and research services from an accredited university.***

SUMMARY

The external evaluation of academic quality in accredited higher education institutions is carried out for the periodical certification, every five years, of the academic quality of the educational and research services as part of the educational process within an *accredited university*.

III.1. EXTERNAL EVALUATION AT INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

- verifying the managerial activity and institutional structures;
- verifying the financial activity
- verifying the internal quality assurance procedures.
- verifying the quality status at institutional level, resulted from the analysis and correlation of all the available information, according to the Methodology.

III.2. EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF THE STUDY PROGRAMMES' QUALITY

Verifying the continuous fulfilment of the requirements according to which the programmes' temporary authorisation/accreditation and institutional accreditation were granted, which begins with the *verification of the fulfilment of the compulsory normative requirements on the temporary functioning authorisation and accreditation of academic degree university studies*, stipulated at paragraph 4.2. of the Methodology, for a number of accredited programmes established according to the number of academic degree fields, but not less than three accredited programmes.

Monitoring the evaluation: a *mission manager*, member of the RQAAHE Council, usually from the *Quality evaluation department*.

The mission manager proposes, as a *coordinator* of the expert evaluators *team* carrying out the visit, a representative of the institutional evaluation Commission for managerial or financial activities or, as the case may be, a representative of one of the permanent speciality experts Commissions evaluating a field, one or several study programmes. The proposal is discussed and approved in the Agency's Council.

The team (commission) of EXPERT EVALUATORS:

- expert evaluators from the FIELDS corresponding to the visited study programmes, usually comprising a member of the permanent speciality experts Commission (they draw up the VISIT RECORD, for the academic quality evaluation of study programmes, signed by all the team members); the *Visit Record* is discussed and approved within the PERMANENT SPECIALITY EXPERTS Commissions, on fields (REPORTS ON THE STUDY PROGRAMMES QUALITY EVALUATION are drawn up for each evaluated programme); the *Reports on the study programmes quality evaluation* shall be submitted to the QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT;

- expert evaluators in the field of managerial and financial activities and institutional structures (draw up the VISIT RECORD and the REPORT OF THE INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION COMMISSION FOR MANAGERIAL AND FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES, which are submitted to the QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT);

- the QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT discusses and approves the *Reports of study programmes quality evaluation* and the *Report of the institutional evaluation commission for managerial and financial activities* (draws up the REPORT OF THE QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT);

- the REPORT OF THE QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT is presented and discussed in the RQAAHE COUNCIL (after approval, it is achieved by the AGENCY'S EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT).

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context

- **The mission of the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** (hereinafter called the *Agency or RQAAHE*), established in compliance with the provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on education quality assurance, approved by Law no. 87/2006, Art.14 (1), consists of the external evaluation of education quality, respectively of the academic results and performances of higher education institutions. In this respect, the Agency contributes to the promotion of public confidence in the rules and standards of issuing university qualifications, respectively diplomas and certificates in the Romanian higher education. This part of the guide describes the methods and procedures applied by the Agency for the **external institutional evaluation**.

The process of quality external evaluation at institutional level (*external institutional evaluation*) is based on a permanent **strategic and informational partnership** between the Agency and the Rectors' National Council (RNC), on the systematic consultation of the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Economic and Social Environment (ACPART), as well as on the collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Research.

1.2. Principles of applying the external institutional evaluation methods

The external evaluation is a process focusing on the quality of study programmes and the standards of issuing diplomas and certificates, as well as on the responsibility of higher education institutions for what they undertake in this respect. The external evaluation is a peer review starting from the documents of internal quality assurance existing in each institution and aims at fulfilling several fundamental principles.

- The external institutional evaluation tries to keep **a balance** between the institutions' need of rigorous, independent and publicly credible evaluation and the recognition of the fact that institutions are in the most appropriate position to provide to all the interested correct and updated information about the quality of their study programmes and standards of issuing diplomas and graduation certificates.
- As part of applying the external institutional evaluation process, the Agency periodically establishes, together with M.Ed.R. and NCHEF, the categories of data, information and criteria related to education quality and compulsory standards for every higher education institution. The Agency expects that higher education institutions should systematically publish a series of annually updated information on quality and standards and carry out their own internal evaluations, in the context of their teaching and learning strategies. **The external institutional evaluation process is mainly based on these published data and information.**
- The external institutional evaluation process requires a high degree of **openness, transparency and confidence in the relation between the Agency and each higher education institution**. In order to ensure the seriousness, impartiality and respect of confidence, the Agency's activity is based on general principles and also on the adoption of a set of principles and rules of functioning that are presented in **APPENDIX 1.1**.
- The quality evaluation process specially focuses on students, respectively on the information they receive about and through study programmes, on the way of facilitating the

learning access and on the academic standards and competences recognised on the labour market which are presumed to be achieved by the academic qualifications obtained by every graduate of a study programme.

The external evaluation combines the assessment of the institutional capacity to adequately organise the development of study programmes, with the investigations on the way of assuring quality at the level of each **study programme** (this term is used in the present Guide in order to cover the whole variety of modalities, options and other study opportunities, individual research and related support for learning, which together represent the learning route allowing the access to diploma granting, at the programme's graduation).

1.3. Periodicity of the external institutional evaluation

The external institutional evaluation process is progressively introduced in the Romanian higher education starting with the academic year 2006-2007. All higher education institutions shall participate in a first stage in the external institutional evaluation until the end of 2009. After that, the external evaluation shall be **cyclically** carried out, **every 5 years**. At the half of each cycle (after minimum two years, but not later than three years), the Agency shall carry out within each institution a short visit of evaluation of the progress achieved since the last external evaluation and to discuss the institution's intentions related to the quality improvement management and reference standards for the remaining years until the next evaluation. Throughout the evaluation cycle, the institutions are presumed to continue to fulfil the level of standards ascertained in the previous evaluation and shall try, at the same time, to reach higher levels.

- During the first academic years of implementing the external institutional evaluation mechanism (2006-2007, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009), the institutions that expect the first external institutional evaluation initially take part in the process, starting from the proper internal institutional evaluation.
- During the first year, the evaluation has an experimental character and is initiated on a **voluntary basis**. In the first year, the experimental character, also called „pilot”, aims at improving the internal mechanism of quality evaluation at the level of study programmes and institutional level, in order to test, with the assistance and in cooperation with the Agency, the internal procedures of quality assurance universities, as well as the relevance and functionality of the standards and reference standards.
- During the first year, the number of institutions submitted to the pilot process is expected to be limited, taking into consideration the training necessities of the Agency's evaluators.

2. Purpose and objectives of the external institutional evaluation

2.1. Purpose of the external institutional evaluation

The purpose of the external institutional evaluation is to identify and certify the way higher education institutions meet public interest, as well as the measures taken for quality improvement, in the following components of the academic life:

- In the teaching-learning process, by assuring an acceptable qualitative level of study programmes, in compliance with the academic reference standards published by the

institution itself and which are at least at the level of the standards, reference standards and performance indicators of RQAAHE, in compliance with the provisions of the Romanian Government Decision no. 1418/11.10.2006.

- In exercising the legal right of granting diplomas and qualifications.

2.2. Objectives of the external institutional evaluation

The objectives of the external institutional evaluation are the following:

- To contribute, along with other mechanisms, to the promotion and assurance of a high quality of the teaching-learning process in higher education institutions.
- To ensure the students, employers and public a wider and more rapid access to clear, trustful and explicit information about the way each institution offers study programmes, diplomas and qualifications that fulfil the national requirements, according to the European academic standards and quality principles.
- To ensure that, in the situations when the study programmes' quality is poor, the external evaluation process creates the conditions to initiate their improvement actions.
- To apply external evaluation mechanisms which guarantee the quality of the teaching-learning process, the management transparency and public liability of higher education institutions.

3. Main issues of the external institutional evaluation process

3.1. Main issues of the external institutional evaluation

The external institutional evaluation focuses on three main aspects, as it follows:

- ***The efficiency of the internal mechanisms and structures of quality assurance*** at the institutions' level (institutional capacity), from the point of view of the Good Practices Code in order to ensure the academic quality and graduation standards in higher education and the degree in which the study programmes' content and quality and the standards of issuing diplomas are periodically revised by each university. This Code is to be elaborated by the Agency after the pilot stage in 2006-2007, taking into account the good practices at European level comprised in the documents of the *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ENQA*. At the same time, it is analysed if the recommendations carried out on the occasion of previous (internal and external) evaluations are implemented and also what is their effect. The aim of this examination is to provide public information on the quality of activities within every higher education institution, as a programme provider for the higher qualification internally and internationally recognised.
- ***The accuracy, the complete and credible character of information*** published by the institutions with regard to the quality of their study programmes and diplomas they issue at graduation. On this occasion, information are provided concerning the level of confidence that can be granted to the informative materials published by the institutions on the activity quality. The information's useful character is emphasised for the students and other interested parties.
- ***The mechanisms and procedures of internal quality assurance, which are analysed by the documentary examination of the study programmes' quality assurance, respectively, by the thematic evaluation of certain activities*** (for example, the way the university ensures the

quality of professional and career guidance services of the students; which is the internal assurance mechanism of examination quality at the level of departments and faculties etc.). The external evaluation aims at demonstrating the validity and credibility of the information provided by the universities on the basis of the internal quality assurance process. As a general trend, within the external institutional evaluation, the study programmes' evaluation is expected to cover at least 20% of the programmes of a higher education institution.

3.2. Main elements of the external institutional evaluation

In order to answer the purpose it is carried out for, the external institutional evaluation has several main elements:

- Examining the mechanisms and internal procedures of assurance and continuous improvement of the quality and results of their application, especially at the study programmes' level.
- The way of using the external references included in the *Quality Assurance Methodology*, including in the *Good Practices Code*.
- The available public information on the content and quality of study programmes and the standards of issuing diplomas at their graduation.
- The internal system of information management and its contribution to the internal monitoring of quality and fulfilment of standards.
- Elaborating, using and publishing the information on programmes.
- The academic standards proposed by the institution and those achieved by the students in obtaining academic qualifications at the graduation of study programmes.
- Students' experience in the learning process.
- Ensuring the teaching staff quality, including the evaluation criteria and the way in which the teaching-learning efficiency is monitored, improved and rewarded by the university's management.
- The way the institution raises the quality level of all educational, research and managerial activities compared to the levels of performance indicators realised at the accreditation.

This enumeration is not limitative, other elements can be added, in mutual agreement with the institution, in order to achieve the external evaluation purpose.

4. Evaluation data for the activities and structures involved in evaluation

4.1. Access to information of the evaluators teams

In order to support the evaluation teams (commissions) in formulating their assessments, they possess a variety of information sources, namely:

- The set of information which is annually reported to the Ministry of Education and Research and, respectively, to the NCHEF – National Council for Higher Education Financing and NURC – National University Research Council. The agency is aware of the fact that institutions shall need time in fulfilling the requirements and shall provide adequate recommendations to the expert evaluators teams who shall visit the institutions within the experimental (pilot) phase.
- The self-evaluation reports elaborated by the institutions, including the self-evaluation documents specific to study programmes and the relevant documentation; the Guide of elaborating the institution's self-evaluation documents and recommendations on the structure of the *Internal evaluation (self-evaluation) report* is presented in APPENDIX 4.1;

- The information within the institution and from other sources about the curricular areas selected for evaluation, including the record of the students' results at these disciplines in the respective university, compared to other higher education institutions.
- Reports on the institution drawn up by the Agency or by other relevant organisations within the last five years.
- Information obtained during or after the evaluation visits.

In order to support the assessments' elaboration, the evaluation teams (commissions) possess information and relevant data analyses, which shall be elaborated by the Agency starting with the experimentation period and, further on, at least annually.

- The team of expert evaluators permanently interacts with a representative of the institution, hereinafter called the ***contact person***. This is a representative member of the academic community, established by the management of the education provider. The contact person contributes to the efficient communication between the Agency's evaluators and the higher education institution and is appointed by the Rector's Decision.

4.2. Students' participation

Students represent a central element of the external institutional evaluation's objectives. The evaluation teams examine a series of relevant aspects for the students:

- the quality of information provided to them, the way the learning process is facilitated and supported, the academic standards that are expected to be achieved and those practically recorded at obtaining the university qualification;
- within each evaluation process, the students are invited to participate in its main stages. Their representative structures – mainly the students' organisation or its equivalent – have the possibility to participate in the preliminary meeting between the Agency and institution and may provide a written report, prior to the evaluation visit. The members of the representative structure, but also other students, are invited to take part in certain meetings during the evaluation visits and have the possibility to ensure that the external evaluation team took notice of the most important aspects and of their preoccupations as students.

The institution is recommended to assure the direct and independent participation of the students in the process, starting with the elaboration of the institutional self-evaluation documents.

5. Finality and utility of the external institutional evaluation and of the reports published by the Agency

5.1. Results of the institutional evaluation

The institutional evaluation results are published by the Agency as the AGENCY'S EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT, which comprises the following types of assessments:

- the confidence that can be granted to the institution's current and predictable management from the point of view of the quality of study programmes and the standards of issuing graduation diplomas; this assessment can be useful in the financing decision from the public or private sources of the institution.
- the confidence that can be granted to the university according to the clear, honest, complete and correct character of the information published by the institution with concern to

the quality of its programmes and certification standards; this assessment is mainly useful to the current and future students of the institution and to other categories of beneficiaries.

The AGENCY'S EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT also formulates comments on other aspects, including on the characteristics, capacities and limits of the internal methods of quality assurance by the institutions, on the quality of study programmes and standards of granting diplomas and study certificates, according to the conclusions of the study programmes' evaluation. The report emphasises aspects of good practice, comprises recommendations of progressive improvement of quality and/or recommendations of internal revision necessary at discipline or institutional level.

5.2. Comparing the quality evaluation results to reference sources

For the quality management evaluation in a higher education institution, a series of external reference sources is used, including the *National framework of qualifications in the Romanian higher education (in course of elaboration)*, the *External evaluation methodology, the standards, reference standards and the list of performance indicators of RQAAHE*, published by the Agency, good practices at European level comprised in the documents of the *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ENQA*. In this way, the aim is to identify the conformity and also to emphasise the way the institution took into consideration the proposals from the reference sources, reflected in its own practices in different areas of activity and conviction that it adopted or shall soon adopt all the necessary measures to assure quality. The Agency wants to ensure that the necessary changes shall be actually carried out for the university to comply with the principles and standards of assurance and continuous improvement of quality.

6. External institutional evaluation team (commission)

6.1. Structure of the external institutional evaluation team (commission)

The external evaluation team (commission) pursues the institution's quality according to the fields, standards, criteria and performance indicators established by the regulations in force, **at institutional level**, accredited as provider of higher education programmes. Taking into account that, by these regulations, the education provider is not disconnected from the programmes offered, in order to achieve the established objectives, the external evaluators team has a structure in order to allow the dialogue with the education provider considered as **institution**, with as many beneficiaries as possible, as well as with the structures responsible for the development of a relevant number of **study programmes**.

Taking into consideration this objective context, the external evaluation team can consist of **minimum three persons, out of whom one is the team coordinator. In well-justified cases, the team can be added additional expert evaluators, according to the number of study programmes or other aspects whose achievement is considered necessary.** The additional, technical or speciality experts, *inside the country or abroad*, are called to offer other opinions on aspects typical to the activity at the level of compulsory normative requirements, discipline or study programme etc.

The *coordinator* of the expert evaluators *team* carrying out the visit is proposed by the *mission director* and may be a representative of the *institutional evaluation Commission for managerial and financial activities* or, as the case may be, a representative of one of the *Commissions of permanent speciality experts* evaluating a field or one or several study programmes. The proposal is discussed and approved in the Agency's Council, after the approval within the Executive Board.

The team size is determined by the Agency in accordance with the dimension and complexity of the evaluated institution's activity. The **team coordinator** is mainly focused on institutional aspects and plays an important role in assuring that, by the team members' activity, relevant data are collected, necessary for a complete evaluation. The other evaluators meet the requirements at institutional level, as well as those at the study programmes' level.

If, during the visit, ambiguities could not be elucidated concerning a study programme, a field, in the financial and managerial activity or with regard to the internal mechanism of quality assurance, at most two technical or speciality **additional expert evaluators, inside the country or abroad**, different from those who took part in the visit, may be requested to carry out a new visit, in a shorter term as possible, specified by the Agency.

The evaluators are selected by the Agency, from its own register of evaluators and are prepared by the Agency so they should better know the purposes, objectives and procedures of the external evaluation process as well as with its own roles and tasks within the evaluation mission.

The evaluators, persons with relevant experience for their positions within the evaluation team, are trained by the Agency according to the dynamics of the methodology, standards, criteria and performance indicators.

The reports of evaluating the study programmes' quality are drawn up by the Agency's commissions of permanent speciality experts. The *Report of the institutional evaluation commission for managerial and financial activities is drawn up by the commission*, with the participation of the expert evaluators, members of the team that carried out the visit, dealing with the financial, patrimony and managerial issues.

6.2. Carrying out the evaluation at the level of the Agency's Council

For each evaluation mission, The *Quality evaluation department* proposes for approval to the Agency's Council a **mission director** out of the members of the RQAAHE Council, an **evaluation team (commission)** and a **team coordinator**.

The **mission director** selects out of the Register of expert evaluators, the evaluation team (commission) members and proposes for approval to the Executive Board of the RQAAHE Council a **coordinator of the evaluation mission**, who is part of the *Institutional evaluation commission*.

For the selection of experts, the elements comprised in the APPENDIX 6.1. shall be taken into account.

Applying the external mechanisms of quality evaluation must be as transparent and efficient as possible and, at the same time, it should not consume more resources than necessary. For this purpose, the team (commission) of expert evaluators uses the existing information and documentary support of the study programmes provider. Thus, the internal documents are submitted for examination to the evaluators assigned by the Agency as self-evaluation documents. Evaluators shall also use other information and documents available in electronic format, for example, on an intranet site of the higher education institution.

The mission director:

- pursues that the time allocated for an evaluation should be the minimum necessary in order to help expert evaluators make their own assessments on the evaluated study programmes as well as on the institution;

- assures the transparency of the evaluation process by applying the standards and reference standards published by the Agency;
- permanently interacts with the *team coordinator*, *the contact person* assigned by the institution.

The external evaluation team (commission) is monitored by the Agency's Council on the whole period of preparation, development and report of the external evaluation mission, by the *mission director*.

The *mission director* formulates recommendations to the institutions during the visit preparation and works with the evaluation team to the initial documentation analysis, using as a benchmark the information from the Agency's database. The *mission director* is an important interlocutor in the dialogue with the evaluated institution's representative. He is also responsible for the mission's achievement, collaborating with the *coordinator of the evaluators team* to the elaboration and, if the case, revision of the final report on the basis of possible suggestions of the evaluated institution. He signs, together with the *mission coordinator*, the final form of the *Evaluation reports of the study programmes' quality* and the *Report of the institutional evaluation commission for financial and managerial activities* presented to the RQAAHE's QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT.

7. Carrying out the external institutional evaluation process

7.1. Preparing and carrying out the external evaluation

The external institutional evaluation process takes place according to the following calendar. (for 2007, when the Methodology is experimentally applied, periods are recommended that to be shorter)

Calendar of organising and carrying out an external institutional evaluation mission

No.crt.	Activities	Period
1	<p>The RQAAHE's Quality Assurance Department takes notice of the Application for external evaluation submitted to the Agency by the university, or of the submittal of another legal document according to which external evaluation is initiated, and of the fulfilment of the contracting conditions for the institutional evaluation and of at least 20% of the study programmes.</p> <p>The application for evaluation shall also contain the list of all the accredited study programmes, within all the fields, for all the three cycles.</p>	<p>The assignment of the <i>director of external evaluation mission</i> is carried out by the RQAAHE, 6 months prior to the evaluation visit, according to the application for institutional evaluation or to other legal document, on the basis of which the external evaluation is initiated, submitted by the institution to the Agency's headquarters.</p> <p>The assignment of the mission director is carried out one month at most since the receipt of the Application for external evaluation.</p>
2.	<p><i>The preliminary visit of the evaluation mission director.</i></p> <p>The mission director visits the institution in order to meet the institution's representatives and students concerning the future evaluation visit. Within the preliminary visit, the list of accredited programmes submitted to evaluation shall be finalised. The mission director discusses and establishes together with the institution the calendar of the external evaluation process, the Evaluation Methodology and corresponding guides. The institution is represented by the <i>contact person</i>.</p>	<p>The preliminary visit of the evaluation mission director takes place 5 months at most before the evaluation visit. The meeting with the contact person is finalised by a document signed by both parties.</p>

3.	At the proposal of the Quality Assurance Department, on the basis of the document presented by the mission director, the Agency's Council approves the list of study programmes that are to be evaluated, as well as the structure of the expert evaluators' team: the team's coordinator, expert evaluators. The data referring to the programmes are communicated to the university in order to prepare the necessary complementary documentation.	Shall be finalised four months at most before the evaluation visit.
4.	The Agency receives the Self-evaluation report (documentation) at institutional level (in printed and electronic format), the documentation for the study programmes selected by the Agency's Council for external evaluation, as well as the appendices in electronic format.	The Agency expects to receive the self-evaluation Report as well as the complete documentation two months at most prior to the evaluation visit. If the documents are not received in due time or if they are ascertained to be incomplete, the Agency reserves the right to re-schedule the visit to a future date which should not disturb the calendar of the other evaluations established by the Agency.
5.	The meeting of the <i>evaluation team coordinator</i> with the contact person and a students' representative in order to identify the objectives of carrying out evaluations during the visit, the possible thematic evaluation fields and the calendar, timetable and place of each stage within the evaluation visit. There will also be established the additional information that must be prepared by the institution until the external evaluation visit.	Shall be carried out at RQAAHE's headquarters, one month at most before the evaluation visit. During the visit, the experts' commission may request to evaluate a limited number of other objectives, as well as certain timetable changes.
6.	The evaluation team visits the institution. <i>The mission director</i> joins the team in the final day of visit. The team of evaluators meets the teaching staff and students in order to discuss issues concerning evaluation at institutional and thematic levels and at the study programmes selected by the Agency. The evaluation of the study programmes and/or fields is usually carried out by one - two experts.	The external institutional evaluation visit is carried out during three week days (usually, from Wednesday to Friday).
7.	If need be, the institution is notified with regard to a possible request for a specialised independent expertise for a study programme or field where ambiguities or doubt have appeared on the internal mechanism of quality assurance. The institution can provide, during the last day of the evaluation visit, additional information that may contribute to the situation's clearing up.	At the beginning of the second day of visit.
8.	<i>The mission director</i> sends the visited institution a letter comprising the preliminary results of the institutional evaluation. The letter is elaborated with the agreement of all evaluation team members and countersigned by the <i>mission coordinator</i> .	In two weeks at the most after the evaluation visit.
9.	If necessary, the mission director establishes within a week, together with the institution, the date/dates when the additional expert evaluators shall be present for the additional visit of evaluating the programme, field or thematic evaluation. This visit takes place within two	Additional expert evaluators submit to the RQAAHE's Quality assurance department reports containing the new visit's conclusions, within a week since the new visit's conclusion.

	weeks at most after the institutional evaluation visit.	
10.	The institution responds to the letter containing the preliminary results of the institutional evaluation.	Within one month at most since the external institutional evaluation visit.
11.	<p>THE QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT discusses and approves the <i>Reports of the study programmes quality evaluation</i> and the <i>Report of the institutional evaluation commission for financial and managerial activities</i>. The <i>Department</i> draws up the REPORT OF THE QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT;</p> <p>THE REPORT OF THE QUALITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION DEPARTMENT is presented and discussed in the RQAAHE COUNCIL, which draws up the AGENCY'S EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT, in the <i>mission director's</i> presence.</p> <p>The Council decides the publication of the <i>Agency's external institutional evaluation report</i> on RQAAHE's website. It is advisable to publish in appendix the answer letter of the evaluated institution.</p>	Within two months at most since the institutional evaluation visit.

7.2. Additional details concerning the development of the activities specified in the external institutional evaluation calendar.

The evaluation process starts **six months** before the documentation visit, when the Agency's Quality Evaluation Department assigns the *mission director* and provides the application for external evaluation submitted by the higher education institution.

- **The preliminary meeting** between the *mission director* and the higher education institution takes place approximately **five months** prior to the evaluation visit. The meeting shall have the role of clarifying the purpose and procedures of the evaluation. The issues discussed shall be the interaction between the evaluation team members, the evaluated institution and Agency, the content of the documentation prepared by the university for external evaluation (to ensure that self-evaluation documents cover all the aspects of the external evaluation process). The database for the selection of the study programmes that shall be evaluated within the mission is also established. The preliminary meeting offers at the same time the possibility of various discussions between the mission director and representatives of the students' organisations with concern to the students' contribution within the external institutional evaluation process.

During this preliminary meeting, the Agency discusses with the institution all the aspects which, at request, are to be evaluated more profoundly than within the usual procedure of evaluating study programmes. These additional evaluations are not usually included in the institutional external evaluation process but their results are pursued by the institution and (if relevant) by the Agency. The findings may have a major contribution to the development of a future stage of evaluation of study programmes (for example, a field or a package of disciplines with a major contribution in obtaining the academic qualification).

On the basis of the preliminary discussions with the higher education institution, as well as of the information existing in the Agency, the mission director proposes for approval to the Agency's

Council the calendar of the institutional evaluation mission and the list of all the institution's study programmes and the minimum number of programmes that are to be evaluated within the mission.

The mission director asks the university to answer in writing if it develops other programmes, at its headquarters or in other centres, besides the study programmes with temporary authorisation or accreditation and other programmes. All the information are transmitted in writing to the Agency's Council.

If the institution carries out such programmes, the Agency's Council notifies the university that it shall not carry out the external institutional evaluation unless all study programmes should become legal. At the same time, The Agency shall immediately inform M.Ed.R. in writing with regard to the ascertained situation.

Within the same preliminary reunion, the Agency's Council establishes, at the Quality Evaluation Department's proposal, the list of the selected study programmes to be evaluated, the main evaluator and the expert evaluators. Approximately **four months** before the visit, the institution is informed on the study programmes that shall be evaluated.

- **Necessary initial documentation**

The institution is requested to place at the Agency's disposal the initial documentation for external evaluation (one printed copy and five copies in electronic format) not later than **two months** before the visit. The initial documentation comprises the updated internal institutional self-evaluation report, the internal self-evaluation reports of the study programmes that were selected for external evaluation, as well as other data, information and documents that the institution wishes to provide in advance to the external evaluation team. APPENDIX 7.1. presents elements on the elaboration of the institution's self-evaluation documents and recommendations on the structure of the *Internal evaluation report (self-evaluation)*. APPENDIX 7.2 presents additional aspects referring to the operation and management of the information received by the Agency, including from students.

At its receipt, the documentation is taken over by the **mission director** in order to ensure its distribution in *electronic format* to the external evaluation team members.

- **External evaluation visit**

The external evaluation mission is usually carried out throughout **three week days**, from *Wednesday to Friday*. The detailed programme for each work reunion with the management, the teaching staff and students is established by the team in mutual agreement with the evaluated institution. A visit usually has the following objectives:

- To consult the additional documentation provided by the institution, including the reports of external examiners involved in the internal self-evaluations.
- To examine the way the institution approaches quality assurance.
- To examine the relation between institutional procedures and their application at the study programmes or discipline level, emphasising the efficiency of the study programmes' internal evaluations.
- To examine the way the institution complies with the requirements of ensuring the knowledge, competences and aptitudes specified in the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education.
- To examine the study programmes' internal evaluation processes, including pre-established discussions, as well as the evaluation of illustrative examples for assessing the students' activities. To examine the accuracy, reliability and complete character of the information published on the institution's website for students and interested public,

focused on the study programmes' specifications (mission, content, academic qualification at the programme's graduation).

- To evaluate the declared quality of the programmes and current results of the students, not only on the basis of academic results, but also of the way students are assisted during the educational process and of the way of optimising the use of learning opportunities.
- To examine the way NURC evaluated the research results and the way the NCHEF quality indicator on research was fulfilled.
- At the conclusion of the evaluation visit, meetings shall take place with the institution's management, respectively, when necessary, with the personnel within the study programmes and/or selected disciplines, with the aim of clearing up the current issues and those resulted from the evaluation.

On the last day of visit, the team works independently, without the participation of the institution's contact person. Under the coordinator's leadership, the team analyses the conclusions/final results of the external evaluation, at institutional and study programmes' level:

- it makes assessments on the confidence that can be granted to the institution for the management of its study programmes and academic standards quality announced by it at issuing diplomas.
- it makes assessments on the confidence of taking into consideration, from the point of view of the accuracy, integrity and complete and correct character, the information that the institution publishes on the quality of its programmes and graduation standards.
- it identifies a series of aspects, such as good practice in quality management or in the teaching-learning process and educational facilitation etc.
- it elaborates preliminary recommendations of the continuous improvement of the activity and disseminated information's quality.

The Agency's *mission director* participates together with the team members in the activity of the last day of external evaluation visit.

Moreover, the last day of visit, the team confirms possible programmes or fields for which it requests the speciality opinion of other independent experts. According to the possibilities, they are brought to the evaluated institution's notice the second day of visit. When the additional speciality opinion is requested, the external evaluation team's results, evaluations and recommendations formulated the last day of visit are provisional.

At the conclusion of the external evaluation visit, **no verbal or written notification is made to the visited institution**. Within **two weeks** from the visit, the institution's management receives a letter from the Agency, which contains the main conclusions of the external evaluation and possible recommendations that shall be comprised in the preliminary report. If the speciality opinion of additional experts shall be taken into consideration, the Agency sends to the institution a letter by means of which it informs that it has sent the documentation to them, but the institution is informed on the main results of the external evaluation only after the additional experts send their own observations to the Agency.

III. 2. EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF STUDY PROGRAMMES' QUALITY AS PART OF THE INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION

8. Study programmes' evaluation

8.1. Aim of the study programmes' evaluation as part of the institutional evaluation

The study programmes' evaluation as part of the institutional evaluation aims at:

- Verifying the measure in which the quality assurance mechanism at institutional level adequately operates at the level of each examined study programme.
- Evaluating real (effective) results obtained by the students during the study programme compared to the results declared by the institution and efficiency of the support provided to the students throughout the educational process.
- Directly comparing the institution's statement with regard to the accuracy, complete and correct character of the provided information about the content and quality of its programmes and about graduation standards to the students' and graduates' experience.

The number of study programmes that are to be examined within every institutional evaluation is determined by the Agency, according to the size and importance of the institution's activity, quantified in number of distinct academic qualifications (diplomas and certificates) granted by the university, at its headquarters or at other centres of providing the same study programme. As general rule, the procedures cover **20% of the programmes of the evaluated higher education institutions**. During the pilot period of applying the quality external evaluation procedures, the Agency can recommend a higher degree of coverage to the institutions.

The evaluated study programmes correspond, in a balanced way, to the three cycles of university studies, respectively academic degree, master of science and doctorate.

The initial identification of the possible study programmes that are to be submitted to external evaluation is carried out by the *mission director*. The purpose of this programme external evaluation is to analyse the efficiency of the model practiced by the institution for its periodical internal evaluations in order to establish the way an educational curriculum covers the training requirements in the respective study field, correlated with the definition of the university qualification proposed to the students at graduation.

There are several reasons for which a study programme (or a field where several programmes are offered) is selected in order to be evaluated:

- Offers a recent illustration of the institutional process of assuring the quality of the programmes and certification standards.
- Presents aspects of particular interest at institutional level or innovative elements in the teaching-learning process.
- A lack of clarity at institutional level has been ascertained in the internal self-evaluation documents concerning the quality assurance engagements and which can be clarified by means of the examination by the team of expert evaluators of a certain programme, respectively of a certain curricular area.
- There are indicators within other documents (including reports of the Agency and of other organisations with regard to the institution) about possible deficiencies.
- When several study programmes are taken into consideration, the external institutional evaluation team must be able to make an aggregate opinion on the institution's range of activities.

- If certain recently evaluated study programmes (usually less than two years before the beginning of the institutional evaluation) receive the „high level of confidence” rating, it is recommended the selection for evaluation of other programmes.

The evaluation of study programmes/fields answers to several general requirements during the institutional evaluation visit. It supposes the activity of one or two experts, out of whom at least one has current or recent experience on the evaluated study programme or curricular area. Normally, approximately 25% of the visit time is allocated to the application of the specific procedures of evaluating the selected study programmes/fields, adapted to the accredited programmes.

8.2. Evaluation method

The evaluation method is carried out as it follows, according to the following elements.

The self-evaluation documents of the study programmes (or of the fields) must be placed at the disposal of the external institutional evaluation team at least two months before the visit. A recent internal report on each study programme submitted to evaluation, also comprising the way of fulfilling the *Compulsory normative requirements for temporary authorisation/accreditation of study programmes*, which stood at the basis of granting the respective status, accompanied by relevant specifications on the educational curriculum, as well as the *specific standards on fields/programmes*, is considered to be enough for this evaluation stage.

The final self-evaluation report, accompanied by appendices in electronic format, must contain all the elements specified in the *Visit Record a) and b)* for each evaluated study programme and, as the case may be, the homologous documents of the previous most recent evaluation. **APPENDIX 8.1** comprises *Elements concerning the elaboration of the study programmes' self-evaluation documents as part of the institutional evaluation*.

Relevant additional documents (internal records regarding the students' results, processed data of opinion surveys among the students and/or teaching staff, report extracts of the chair or faculty council meetings etc.) may be requested one month at most before the visit, usually at the meeting of the institution's contact person with the mission director. In all cases, the documentation must limit itself to the team's essential information, according to the requirements formulated by him.

- The discussions of the evaluation team members with the institution's teaching staff and students (at the study programme level) are carried out on specific themes identified by the team, but also enable the teaching staff and students to bring to the team's attention a series of other aspects of interest for ensuring or improving quality. The participation in the discussions within the internal evaluations of a number of persons from outside (graduates, partners in training programmes etc.) may also be requested.
- The discussions with the teaching staff and students about the content and modality of transmitting knowledge from the disciplines' analytical syllabuses are carried out in order to verify the accuracy and reliability, the complete character of the information provided by the institution to the current and potential students, employers and other persons interested in the programmes' quality and their graduation standards.
- Verifying the relation between the offered study programmes and the knowledge, competences and aptitudes expected at each study programme's graduation is carried out by discussions on the quality of the teaching-learning process and on the performances achieved by the students.

After evaluating every study programme/field and filling in the *Visit record*, results a conclusion drawn by the team on the way the institution's quality assurance commitments practically operate, at programme/discipline level, on the way of ensuring a reasonable level of quality and

graduation standards. Normally, the team's evaluations are expected to confirm the institution's assessments. If the self-evaluation document of a study programme/field indicates deficiencies, the external evaluation team shall try to ensure that the institution understands and adopts the proper measures for rapidly removing those deficiencies.

In certain circumstances, the team may find itself in the impossibility to draw a conclusion with concern to the visit. These circumstances involve:

- The identification of a potentially different performance which the team cannot confirm without the opinion of independent specialists for the curricular area.
- The identification of a major deficiency/deficiencies in facilitating the study process which the team cannot confirm without the opinion of other specialists.
- The identification of a significant discrepancy between the information disseminated by the institution and the team's conclusions.

In these circumstances, after consulting the **mission director**, the evaluation team notifies the institution the penultimate day of visit (if the evaluation procedure of the study programme / field is almost complete until that moment) that it is not able to draw a conclusion without benefiting from an opinion of additional experts. After the notification, during the last day of the evaluation visit, the institution may provide the team with additional information. In case if, the final day, the team confirms the intention to request the opinion of other independent experts, the Agency shall appoint a team of at least 2 experts. These experts shall carry out in the following two weeks a separate evaluation of the curricular area. In such situation, the Agency's evaluation team shall not adopt any final conclusion on a programme/field without referring to the point of view of these additional experts.

The reference to additional experts has the aim of carrying out a more profound study of the study programme/field, for refining particular aspects signalled by the Agency's team. Their activity consists of verifying the institution's statement with concern to the quality, based on the primary internal evaluation record and on the students' activity. The activity involves several meetings with the students and teaching staff and may also involve external evaluators used by the institution in carrying out its own internal evaluation. Where the speciality conclusions identify possible deficiencies in facilitating the teaching-learning process, the evaluation also includes the verification of the interaction between teaching staff and students (separate reunions of the independent experts with the students and members of the involved teaching staff). The experts' results are not reported to the evaluated institution but to the Agency, so that the latter should take them into consideration within the final evaluation. The draft final report is elaborated after the experts carry out their own activity and shall not be placed at the institution's disposal, until the team draws the final conclusions.

- The conclusions formulated by the additional experts may consist of recommendations for the Agency's evaluation team to carry out a complete evaluation at the level of study programmes. Such a recommendation may take place when the speciality experts' assessments indicate the fact that there are well-grounded reasons of concern with regard to the quality of the study programmes and/or the graduation standards.

Under these circumstances, the Agency may propose to the institution to carry out a separate evaluation of all the study programmes on the basis of the procedures described in the *Study programmes evaluation guide, changing the term of drawing up the AGENCY'S EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT and with the re-negotiation of the contract.*

III.3. THEMATIC INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION

9. Thematic evaluation

The thematic institutional evaluation represents the analysis at institutional/inter-department level of the way of operation for certain components of the quality assurance strategy. It can be carried out at request or on the evaluation team's own initiative, if a certain component of the quality management and standards announced by the institution is considered to present a particular interest or if the evaluation requires the verification of certain aspects of the inter-discipline training.

Relevant data for the thematic evaluations may be obtained by means of the procedures of evaluating study programmes, as well as during the discussions with the teaching staff and students. If, throughout the thematic evaluation, the team identifies problems at the level of the disciplines of study, it may request the opinion of independent speciality experts.

According to the *National framework of qualifications in the Romanian higher education* (in course of elaboration), the team analyses on the basis of the results obtained at the study programmes' evaluation, if the study programmes submitted to the thematic evaluation correspond to the graduation standards established by the institution or to the standards specified for the professions settled by Romania's engagements in its quality of member state of the European Union.

III.4. THE AGENCY'S EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT

10. Content and structure of the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report*

The observations of the external institutional evaluation are comprised in the *Agency's Institutional evaluation report*, which shall be published. The conclusions of this report represent the final evaluation on the *credibility that can be granted to the institution's management with regard to the study programmes' quality assurance and fulfilment of the academic standards of granting graduation diplomas*. The conclusions are based on a series of evaluation observations, such as the extent to which quality was ensured, taking into account the real situation observed during the evaluation visit, the context/conditions and mission of the institution, but also the way it was managed and reflected in the institution's primary records.

- The *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* mentions one of the three statements, as a conclusion or rating, referring to the credibility of the quality assurance management within the evaluated institution, respectively the *"high degree of confidence"*, *"limited degree of confidence"* or *"non-confidence"*. In order to give the ratings, in the *External institutional evaluation report* shall be specified the level of fulfilling the standards, by the achieved performance indicators, and the compulsory normative requirements. **The Agency is expecting for them to be situated at least at the adequate level achieved at the programme accreditation and respectively institutional accreditation.**

- Establishing the degree of credibility is in fact an assessment with a certain level of relativity. Generally, when the evaluation team assesses on the basis of the institution's records and findings during the visit, that the institution adequately ensures the quality conditions and standards and, for this reason, it creates conditions for the future quality assurance as well, the „**high degree of confidence**” rating shall be granted. When the team has some doubts, with concern to the current assurance of quality and standards, or with concern to the institution's capacity to maintain the quality and standards in the future, the „**limited degree of confidence**” rating shall be granted, and recommendations for the immediate improvement of the situation are made. When the team gives the „**non-confidence**” rating to an institution, it must clearly indicate the elements that brought about this assessment. With regard to the last two ratings, the institution is invited, within one academic year, to take strong measures of rectifying the deficiencies or shortcomings. If the institution does not correct or does not rectify the above-mentioned deficiencies within one academic year, the Agency proposes to the MEdR the initiation of the procedures of cancelling the accreditation authorisation, according to the provisions in force.

The final section of the evaluation report also presents the justification of the degree of confidence which can be reasonably granted, taking into account the **accuracy, integrity, complete and correct character of the information** disseminated by the institution with concern to the quality of its programmes and the certification standards of graduating these programmes.

In drawing up its assessments, the institution pays a special attention to the Agency's requirements in two key fields. The first requirement is that the **institution should frequently appeal to external independent evaluators** within the internal institutional self-evaluation procedures of quality assurance. The second requirement consists of similarly using **independent experts from abroad** in applying the procedures of internal periodical evaluation at the level of disciplines, study programmes or research. The Agency's institutional evaluation team is not able to carry out an evaluation with the „**high degree of confidence**” rating, if one of these elements is poor.

The assessments related to the institution's credibility, respectively the „**limited degree of confidence**” and „**non-confidence**” are accompanied by **recommendations**, which shall be taken into consideration by the institution, according to the priorities, as it follows:

- „Essential” recommendations refer to measures that the evaluation team considers to be important from the point of view of quality assurance and which require urgent correcting actions.
- „Preventive” recommendations refer to aspects that the team considers potential elements or sources of risk to the quality and which require preventive correcting actions;
- „Desirable” recommendations refer to measures whose application could improve the programmes' quality and should assure higher reference standards in the future.

The final part of the report can also mention the **aspects of good practice** in quality management and in redefining the reference standards at institutional level and at the level of study programmes.

The Agency's External institutional evaluation report usually comprises *some comments upon certain issues*, such as: organisational characteristics, strengths and limits in elaborating and applying the institutional methods of quality assurance; the quality of the study programmes and graduation standards. The final report also comprises a **synthetic assessment for each study programme** comprised in the institutional evaluation. The report enumerates at the same time the **fields for which**

there are well-grounded reasons for the immediate implementation of a plan of corrective measures at the level of study programme/discipline or at institutional level.

The structure of the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* is presented in **APPENDIX 10.1**. **APPENDIX 10.2** gives indications on possible situations where the external evaluation results bring about the granting of the „*limited degree of confidence*” or „*non-confidence*” ratings.

11. The way of finalising and distributing the Agency's External institutional evaluation report

The letter containing the preliminary results of the institutional evaluation, with the main elements of the **draft report**, is prepared and submitted to the institution, usually in two weeks after the visit. The institution is demanded to notify the Agency within one month since the evaluation visit (within two weeks from the receipt of the letter referring to the preliminary report's content) the corrections considered necessary as they are related to the errors resulted from the data taken over from the self-evaluation documents or to the misunderstanding of information/actions. The draft report is revised according to the institution's complaints, if these complaints are completely documented. The **mission director** coordinates the elaboration of the draft report, and its form and structure correspond to the elements presented in **APPENDIX 10.1**.

The *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* approved by the Agency's Council is published by the Agency and has the aim of providing information for the wide public as well as for the professionals (university staff and management staff, researchers, stakeholders etc.). Therefore, the report comprises a summary especially meant for the wide public, mainly for the students. It is provided separately from the rest of the report. On the other hand, the institution is requested to provide a short statement of accepting the report's conclusions in order to be published by the Agency as appendix to the report. The statement offers the institution the possibility to present the evolution registered after the visit of the evaluation commission, in particular, the actions carried out or proposed and related to the recommendations comprised in the report.

Normally, the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* is published on the RQAAHE website (www.aracis.ro) by RQAAHE within maximum two months since the institutional evaluation visit. This period can be extended if, according to the additional speciality experts, new investigations are necessary for the correct assessment of quality assurance for one or several study programmes or fields, in the conditions of the re-negotiation of the contract concluded between the university and agency for covering the costs of the additional evaluation activities.

12. The way of valorising the external institutional evaluation and further actions

The evaluation process is considered concluded when the Agency's Council takes notice of the content of the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report*, elaborated in final form, and approves it.

- If the report gives the „*high degree of confidence*” rating, the external evaluation is concluded by publishing the report. Granting the „*high degree of confidence*” rating is usually accompanied by a limited set of recommendations which are considered to have a preventive result. There might be certain observations that should lead the university to adopt measures considered to be immediately necessary, but there shall be no essential observation. Granting this rating represents the confidence of the Agency's evaluation team in the institution's

capacity and engagement to identify and approach any situation which could threaten the quality of the programmes and certification standards of graduating a study programme.

- One year **after the report's publication**, the Agency carries out a brief investigation by mail with the evaluated institution, in order to find out about the way it took into consideration the observations and recommendations comprised in the report. **Three years after** the report's publication, the Agency shall carry out a short visit at the institution's headquarters in order to analyse together with the latter the progress registered after the evaluation and to discuss its intentions referring to the quality and graduation standards' management until the next institutional evaluation.
- If the report grants the „**limited degree of confidence**” rating, the report is published, but a plan of action is implemented in order to improve the quality of the institution's activity. The Agency demands the institution, **within three months** from the publication of the evaluation report, to adopt a plan of action and to present a **half-yearly report on the implementation of the plan of action**. The external evaluation results are officially considered as final only when the Agency is satisfied with the successful implementation of the plan of action, with a maximum time limit of **18 months**, allowing the granting, under the new conditions, of the „**high degree of confidence**” rating. If there are still uncertainties related to the efficiency of the improvement actions, the Agency carries out another external evaluation visit, with the contract's renegotiation and publishes the new external evaluation report, which becomes a final document.
- The report is also published if it comprises the „**non-confidence**” rating. In this case, shall be applied the provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on education quality assurance, approved by Law no. 87/2006, Art.34 and Art.35.
- If the report recommends that a complete evaluation should be carried out at the level of a certain study programme or of a certain curricular area, the analysis is realised by the Agency according to the procedures described in the *Study programmes evaluation guide*. This includes an additional evaluation throughout a calendar year, with the contract's renegotiation, for the identification of the potential remaining elements of risk.
- **Three years** after the institutional evaluation, the Agency carries out a **short visit** within the institution in order to analyse the progress registered from the conclusion of the previous evaluation mission and to discuss the institution's intentions referring to the continuous improvement of the quality management and increase of the reference standards for the next **two years**, until the next evaluation mission. Within the preparation stage of this short visit, the Agency analyses all the relevant internal evaluation reports, elaborated by the institution during the three years from the conclusion of the evaluation mission. If one of the reports raises signs of concern towards the way of approach applied by the institution, the Agency may change the date of the following evaluation mission.

13. Management of the evaluation process and institutional relations

The process management takes place in compliance with the *External evaluation methodology, the standards, reference standards and list of performance indicators of RQAAHE* elaborated and published by the Agency. The **mission director** takes the responsibility of pursuing the institutional evaluation. The conclusions and recommendations resulted from the audit are elaborated by the whole evaluation team and by the permanent speciality commissions under the direction of the **evaluation team's coordinator**. The **mission director** has the responsibility of justifying the conclusions and recommendations with relevant data and proof from the evaluated institution's records or from the observations carried out during the visit. At the same time, he verifies together with the members of the

team and of the permanent speciality commissions if the information comprised in the report are relevant, easily identifiable and accessible.

The Agency takes all the necessary steps in order to build a close and constructive relation with the evaluated institution, in order to enable it to comply with the requirements specific to the functioning at the level of the reference standards that it formulated and publicly announced.

The Agency takes all the measures in order to assure the quality of the audit process, by explicitly adopting the functioning principles and standards, presented in **APPENDIX 1.1.**, and a mechanism of assuring the quality of its own activity. This enables the participants in various evaluation missions, including the students, to provide a feed-back of their experience.

14. Procedure of solving the complaints

The Agency makes all the efforts to have, with each evaluated university, a close and constructive relation, based on the systematic and continuous communication between the institutions. At the same time, after the evaluation visit, the *mission director* sends to the evaluated university a letter comprising the preliminary results of the institutional evaluation, in order to be able to transmit in writing possible comments and suggestions of correcting certain data that have been misunderstood or inadequately taken over.

As the data used in the report's arguments are public and provided by the institution in writing or during the evaluation visit, the university may only dispute the way of carrying out the external evaluation process for faulty drafting. After publishing the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report* on the RQAAHE website, the institution may dispute in writing the rating granted by the Agency, within two weeks at most from the date of publication, by a letter registered at the Agency within the delay mentioned.

Within 30 days at most from the complaint's receipt, the Agency's Council Board reanalyses the report, invites the university's rector and the contact person for a discussion of solution, then it submits its proposal to the Council's approval. The Council's president officially notifies the university with regard to the result of the report's re-examination.

The Agency publishes on the website a note on the way the claim was solved.

APPENDICES TO THE EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION GUIDE

APPENDIX 1.1. The functioning principles and standards promoted by the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

APPENDIX 6.1 Selecting and training the expert-evaluators

APPENDIX 7.1. Elements on the elaboration of the institution's self-evaluation documents and recommendations on the structure of the *Internal evaluation report (self-evaluation)*.

APPENDIX 7.2. Aspects related to the operation and management of the information received by the Agency and students

APPENDIX 8.1. Elements on the elaboration of the self-evaluation documents of study programmes as part of the institutional evaluation

APPENDIX 10.1. The informative structure of the *Agency's External institutional evaluation report*

APPENDIX 10.2. Indications on possible situations when the external evaluation results bring about the granting of the "*limited degree of confidence*" or "*non-confidence*".

The functioning principles and standards promoted by the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The Agency aims at fulfilling and promoting the general principles mentioned further on, at strategic and operational levels of its activity:

- ***Inclusiveness*** – taking into consideration the interests and expectations of all the persons and groups publicly interested in higher education and facilitating their participation in all the aspects of the Agency's activities.
- ***Openness*** – the transparency of the Agency's activity and methods, building institutional confidence between the Agency and universities, providing information to the wide public with concern to the Agency's activity.
- ***Sequentiality*** – the necessity of regular, systematic and punctual action in all the evaluation and reporting activities, with the aim of supporting the decisional process at the Agency level and at the level of higher education system.
- ***Comparability*** – using the gained experience within the Agency and other organisations as means of information within future activities.
- ***Relevance*** – ensuring that the information provided by the Agency is useful and understood by the beneficiaries.

These principles are applied in order to develop standard external evaluation services, according to the Methodology presented on the Agency's website.

The Agency is the object of an internal systematic monitoring and of an evaluation of the strategy, procedures and processes, with the aim of ensuring permanent credibility and continuous improvement of its performance. It is for this purpose that the advisory Commission of the RQAAHE's Council operates.

Selecting and training the expert-evaluators**Introduction**

1. Expert-evaluators and additional experts are selected by the Agency according to the published selection criteria and generally from its own record of expert-evaluators. Additional experts, specialists in certain study programmes or fields, may be selected among the designations of the universities and professional organisations.
2. All the persons involved in the external evaluation, including the mission directors, benefit from training programmes coordinated by the Agency's Council in order to ensure that they are aware of the purposes, objectives and procedures of the external evaluation process and have the competence of assuming their own role within this process.
3. The qualities required to the persons involved in the external evaluation are mentioned above in a different section. Each selection procedure aims at ensuring the balance within the group of evaluators from the point of view of the sector, branch, geographic, on sexes and ethnic characteristics.
4. If a second opinion from independent experts is needed, they shall be thus selected in order to ensure the necessary competence to examine the content of a study programme or of a curricular area and evaluate the level of the academic standards of a programme's graduation.
5. The Agency carries out the training of the personnel involved in external evaluation in collaboration with adequate providers of training programmes. The training purpose is to ensure that:
 - The purposes and objectives of the external evaluation process are understood.
 - The involved procedures are known.
 - Their role is properly understood and their tasks fulfilled, but there shall be team work in answering the Agency's expectations and respecting the process rules.
 - Is completely valorised the opportunity to explore and practice the assimilation and data analysis techniques, to draw up visit programmes, to build and test hypotheses, to formulate conclusions and statements on the degree of confidence, to prepare reports.

Qualities required for expert evaluators

- Relevant experience in the academic management and in quality assurance at institutional level in higher education.
- Personal and professional credibility from the institutions' management and/or stakeholders coordinating the activity of the higher education sector.
- Ability to assimilate a great quantity of heterogeneous information, to analyse data and facts and to elaborate reasonable conclusions on complex actions and to carry out research and investigations within documentary and verbal records with the aim of issuing conclusions/assessments.
- Clear oral and written communication skills.
- If they represent a certain academic field, they should possess current or recent teaching experience, or experience in supporting the learning process at the level of the academic degree, master of science and doctoral study cycles, namely by using the results of the scientific research.

Qualities required for additional experts for external evaluation, inside the country or abroad

- Personal credibility in the field, in higher education or equivalent professional credibility.
- Current experience in the teaching process or in supporting the learning process at the level of the academic degree or master of science programmes within the respective field of university studies.
- Experience to work with study programme specifications elaborated for the respective field; a good understanding of the admission requirements within the study programme and ability to interpret the statistics upon the students' performances; knowing the comparable programmes from other universities and the graduation and certification standards within other institutions.
- Ability to assimilate an important quantity of heterogeneous information, to analyse and elaborate a reasonable conclusion on complex actions.
- Ability to identify, plan and follow the directions of an evaluation with the aim of answering the tasks specified by an audit commission, by using various sources, including documentary and oral records, in order to draw a credible conclusion.

Elements on the elaboration of the institution's self-evaluation documents and recommendations on the structure of the *Internal evaluation report (self-evaluation)*.

Aim of the institution's self-evaluation documents

1. The institution's self-evaluation documents are the initial reference elements for the commission of expert-evaluators. Their importance results from the preoccupation to bring to the notice of the interested public, on the one hand, the institutional methods of assuring the quality of study programmes and graduation standards and, on the other hand, the attention paid by the institution to the quality, consistency and entirety of the information published with relation to the training offer expressed in its own reference standards.

2. The self-evaluation documents enable the institution to:

- create the conditions by means of which, on the basis of the analysis and internal evaluation results, the institution's strengths should be confirmed and publicly certified by the external evaluation process, and assess the efficiency of the policies and procedures of quality assurance and continuous improvement management;
- to present its own evaluation of the way the institution exercises its responsibilities in two vital fields within the institutional evaluation: *providing quality programmes*, publicly reasoned by adequate reference standards and, respectively, the *adequate exercise of public liability in granting diplomas and certificates at graduating study programmes*;
- to present its own efficiency evaluation of the internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms; the way to ensure the accuracy, the complete and credible character of the information published by the institution, its practices and procedures about the mission and main objectives of institutional evaluation;
- to allow the external evaluation team understand the way the institution ensures the quality and standards of graduating study programmes, to enable the team to draw a conclusion on the confidence that can be granted to the institution's management at present, and, in the near future, on the quality and fulfilment of standards or reference standards.

Style and dimension of the institution's self-evaluation documents

3. The institution's self-evaluation documents must:

- Be honest and relevant.
- Be concise and reasoned by attached documents, available to the evaluation commission.
- Offer a large perspective at institutional level.
- Present an adequate balance between *description* and *self-evaluation*.

4. The self-evaluation documents must provide enough data in order to enable the external evaluation team to understand the main characteristics of the way the institution approaches the quality assurance process compared to the national standards/its own reference standards publicly announced on the institution's website. The documents must focus on the efficiency and concision of the way of presentation. If the institution expresses confidence in its own efficiency, the institution's self-evaluation documents must be thus elaborated as to minimise the need for additional data and clearing

up for the team of expert-evaluators. As the perception and confidence given by the team depend (at least in the initial phase) on the institution's self-evaluation documents, it is important for them to be clear and easily verifiable by means of the attached documentation prepared by the institution.

5. The *internal self-evaluation report* has normally **about 40 pages and is submitted in written and electronic format**. The appendices and additional documents are only submitted in electronic format.

To enable the homogeneous presentation of the RQAAHE Reports and analyses, all the documents presented in electronic format shall be written in font: Times New Roman, font size: 12, line spacing: 1.5 lines. The documents shall be drawn up in WORD and pdf.

Structure of the Internal evaluation report (institutional self-evaluation)

6. The Internal evaluation report (institutional self-evaluation) is structured as follows:

- Introduction (presentation of the institution and the dynamics of its performances in the period from the last external evaluation);
- The quality assurance process of study programmes and standards, respectively, reference standards, as part of the institutional strategic management;
- Presentation of the measures of assuring the accuracy, the complete and confidence character of the information disseminated by the institution.

7. In elaborating its own self-evaluation documents, the institution is required:

- (i) to create the conditions to enable the external evaluation commission to easily identify the dimension, type of institution, mission, study cycle/cycles for which it provides study programmes, the organisational and managerial structure of the educational and scientific research activity;
- (ii) to submit and analyse on a document-basis the progress registered in the field of providing study programmes from the last external evaluation;
- (iii) to submit and analyse its own observations carried out on the occasion of the internal evaluations on subjects or curricular areas, as well as on the way of taking into account and solving the ascertained defaults, in order to promote the improvement of the institutional practice;
- (iv) to describe in brief the main characteristics of its own institutional framework and its own activities of quality assurance and maintenance of the academic standards of issuing diplomas and graduation certificates, of continuous improvement of study programmes' quality and of the support for the learning-training process;
- (v) to describe the internal professional rules of the professors and students and to emphasise all the important changes operated at institutional level as answer to their application;
- (vi) to mention the use of external reference sources, including the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education and, if possible, the reference standards of the fields specific to each study programme („*Subject benchmark statements*”);

(vii) to describe and comment for the next **four** years its own strategy for consolidating good results and removing the identified defaults;

(viii) to identify the disciplines or fields at the level of the whole institution that exemplify good practice and illustrate the formulated statements.

8. When the institution is trained during the external evaluation in a process of changing its own system or procedures, the Agency shall accept the lack of availability of the records that illustrate the new structures' efficiency. In these conditions, the institution must refer to the way it manages and monitors the changing process. The Agency expects for these changes not to be operated by the institution during the authorisation/accreditation process.

Submitting the documents to the Agency

9. The institution is required to submit to the Agency the self-evaluation as well as the other documents and records, attached in a copy in printed and electronic format, according to the **Calendar of the organisation and carrying out of the external institutional process for authorisation/accreditation**, respectively at least **two months** before the external evaluation visit.

Confidentiality

10. The content of the institution's self-evaluation documents remains confidential at the level of Agency and external evaluation team. Nevertheless, in case if the advice of independent experts is necessary on fields or subject areas, the self-evaluation documents shall be placed at their disposal, in conditions of confidentiality commitment of the data they operate with.

Aspects related to the operation and management of the information received by the Agency and students

Introduction

1. Students represent the main objective of each institutional evaluation. Therefore, they are invited to take part in the main stages of this process. The students' representative organisation within the institution – normally the students' organisation or its equivalent – has the possibility to participate in most of the stages of an external evaluation process, starting with the preliminary visit of the director of institutional evaluation mission that takes place five months before the evaluation visit. Moreover, the members of the representative structure and other students, are also invited to take part in the stages of the institutional evaluation visit. These meetings offer the students the opportunity to ensure that the external evaluation team is aware of the most important aspects for them.

2. In order to start the external evaluation process, the university must present the institutional self-evaluation documents, as well as the statement by means of which it ensures the Agency that the information provided to the students and other categories of interested public are clear, complete and trustful. The Agency encourages the university to consult the students with regard to the content of the self-evaluation documents and to invite the students, through their representative organisation, to elaborate their own written report.

3. The students' written report offers additional possibilities by means of which the students, through their representative organisation, notify the external institutional evaluation team on the most important aspects for them. This report represents the result of a voluntary action within the external evaluation process and no institution shall be penalised if its students do not wish to submit a written report to the commission of evaluators.

Format, dimension and content

4. There is no pre-established rule regarding the format and dimension of the students' written report or a pre-established list of the elements it should contain. Students are free to provide any type of information they consider adequate and useful for the objectives of the external institutional evaluation process and to elaborate it as they wish.

5. Nevertheless, the report includes a presentation of the students' organisation, of its representativeness among the university's students, if the report has in view only the students from an educational cycle or expresses points of view of all categories of students, information with concern to the way the opinions were gathered and the way of elaboration, the relation between the students' organisation, the university management and institution's administration, whether and how they took notice of the content of the university's official self-evaluation documents etc.

6. The report does not represent an alternative to the institutional self-evaluation documents and do not have to be a comment of the institutional self-evaluation documents. Students can choose to consider the issues used by the institution in elaborating its self-evaluation documents and/or take into consideration the interest fields particularly pursued within the external institutional evaluation and

communicated by the mission director at the preliminary visit, five months prior to the visit. These include:

- The accuracy, complete and trustful character of the information published by the institution about the quality of its programmes and graduation standards (there can be included the accuracy of publicity materials and referrals to the programmes' specifications).
- The information received by the students on the expected academic performances, their experience resulted from the study programmes and the method of evaluating their performances (aspects may be included, such as: the useful character of the professional supervision guides for study programmes, the evaluation and feed-back received by the students for their academic performances).
- Students' experience in the learning process (here can be included the quality of the academic and non-academic support and access to the learning facilities).
- Students' participation in the quality management and graduation standards within the institution (this could include the representation possibility within the commissions at university and programme level, but also other modalities to provide the feed-back to the institution's teaching staff and management).

7. The report drawn up by the students must not comment upon the competence of certain members of the teaching staff or management nor contain claims/personal complaints.

Style

8. The written report must:

- Be balanced and relevant.
- Be concise.
- Present an adequate balance between description and evaluation.

Elaboration/drawing up details

9. The students' report must be transmitted to the Agency at least two months prior to the institutional evaluation visit.

Confidentiality

10. The Agency particularly supports the dialogue between the students' organisation and institution, and recommends that students should transmit the written report to the institution and that the institution should provide the students' organisation with its self-evaluation documents. This openness enables the external evaluation team to freely discuss both documents, with the university staff and students during the evaluation process and to verify the accuracy of their contents. If the students' organisation wishes so, it may request, even at submitting the document, that the written report should not be placed at the institution's disposal and that its confidentiality should be maintained by the Agency, by the team and any other independent expert requested to assist the team within its activity. The Agency shall respect this wish, but students should take into consideration the fact that the confidential use of their report brings about a weak impact at university level, as the institution's personnel does not know the students' opinion.

Elements on the elaboration of the self-evaluation documents of study programmes as part of the institutional evaluation

Data concerning the programmes

1. After the Agency notifies the university in writing with concern to the list of the study programmes that shall be evaluated within the institutional evaluation visit, the university has two months in order to prepare and make available to the team of expert evaluators the self-evaluation documents for each programme.

2. If a recent internal evaluation of the study programme is not available, the university may prepare a short self-evaluation document especially for the institutional evaluation process. Such a programme self-evaluation document contains around 3000 words and covers the following aspects:

- The educational objectives of the study programme – a presentation of the programme's mission and objectives through the distinct academic qualification offered by its graduation.
- The expected results of the learning process and evaluating the degree of compliance of the effective results with the educational objectives proposed by the programme, referring to the internal (*Subject benchmark statements*) or external (*National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education*) sources.
- The educational *curriculum*, in compliance with the RQAAHE's *specific standards on fields*.
- The method of evaluating/marking the students in order to register the progression towards the academic level of certification/granting of the graduation diploma.
- The quality of the learning process' opportunities, which can be divided in:
 - Teaching and learning – evaluating the efficiency of the teaching and learning strategies applied within the programme in order to provide the students with increased learning opportunities;
 - Students' admission and their evolution/progress – evaluating the way the students' evolution within the study programme is supported and monitored, from admission until graduation;
 - Study resources – evaluating the efficiency of the available human and material resources supporting the students' learning process and the efficiency of their correlation with the proposed results of the learning process within the programme/programmes.
- The maintenance and increase of standards and quality – evaluating the efficiency of the procedures of maintaining and enforcing the quality of the training activity and of assuring the academic standards of graduating the programme.
- Appendices, in electronic format, which should contain the necessary data requested in the *Visit Record, sections a) and b)* and for each evaluated programme, the „*STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS for accreditation*” *RECORD* from **PART I – EXTERNAL EVALUATION FOR THE STUDY PROGRAMMES' ACCREDITATION**.

3. The self-evaluation documents of each study programme must focus on the evaluation of the students' results, on the analysis of the study facilities offered to the students. The programme's description must limit itself to the minimum issues in order to enable the team of external evaluators understand the quality and efficiency of its own self-evaluation experience.

Submitting the documents to the Agency

4. The evaluated university is requested to present to the Agency the self-evaluation documents of the study programmes at least two months before the institutional evaluation visit.

Confidentiality

5. The self-evaluation documents of a study programme remain confidential at the level of Agency and external evaluation team. Nevertheless, if need be, the self-evaluation documents shall be placed at the disposal of independent experts who may be asked to provide a speciality opinion.

The informative structure of the Agency's *External institutional evaluation report*

Executive summary

The executive summary has a common structure for all the external evaluation reports submitted to the attention of the Agency's Council and comprises in its final part the evaluation results and conclusions. It **addresses the wide public**, especially to the potential students and is available separately from the rest of the report. This summary comprises:

- Introductory statement on the general objectives of the evaluation
- Summary of the evaluation commission's conclusions
- Credibility of the information disseminated by the institution
- Assessing the academic infrastructure
- Good practice characteristics
- Statement on the confidence granted to the institution
- Recommendations on the institution's activity

The external institutional evaluation report

The external institutional evaluation report is prepared **for the use of the audited university and for the Agency's database**. After being approved by the Agency's Council, this report is published on the Agency's website together with the letter of the evaluated university.

The main report consists of three parts:

- (1) a descriptive introduction with standard content (the institution's dimension, type, mission and particularities, organisational structure, list of programmes on university study cycles, the type of information disseminated by the institution for students and candidates, the progress registered since the last academic evaluation);
- (2) a description of the evaluation process with the conclusions of each stage of analysing the quality assurance at institutional and study programme level, of fulfilling the graduation standards; this part also contains observations on the results of comparing the statements contained in the self-evaluation report to the observations on site and the results of the discussions carried out with the teaching staff representatives, with the students, graduates and possibly the graduates' employers;
- (3) assessments with regard to the credibility, accuracy and complete character of the published information.

External evaluation results

The external evaluation results with concern to the entire institution refer to the institution's managerial capacity to ensure and continuously improve the quality of study programmes; the capacity to efficiently support learning in order to achieve graduation standards. These results can be thus structured:

- The efficiency of the institutional procedures of programme quality assurance.
- The efficiency of the institutional procedures of ensuring graduation standards.
- The efficiency of the institutional procedures of supporting the educational process.
- The internal evaluation results of the study programmes' quality.
- The students' use of the academic infrastructure.
- The utility of the self-evaluation documents in illustrating the institution's capacity to reflect its own possibilities and limits and the way to manage them in order to enforce quality and graduation standards.
- The credibility of the information disseminated by the institution with regard to the study programmes.
- Good practice aspects
- Statement related to the confidence granted to the institution
- Recommendations for the institution's activity

Indications on possible situations when the external evaluation results bring about the granting of the “*limited degree of confidence*” or “*non-confidence*”

1. Granting the „*limited degree of confidence*” rating is determined by the fact that there are obvious proof or ascertained aspects according to which the institutional capacity of quality management of programmes and/or certification standards in a solid and efficient manner, is limited or potentially limited in the future. Such a conclusion may be based on deficiencies of the management of the institutional structures and procedures or in the implementation process at the level of programmes or disciplines. The confidence may be limited also because of the amplitude or typology of the deficiencies identified in any other evaluated field or programme. The Agency may decide upon the granting of the „limited degree of confidence” rating if there are justified reasons of doubt in considering that the information provided by the institution and publicly available are complete, correct and trustful or when the institution uses in a small measure independent external examiners within the internal periodical evaluations of disciplines or study programmes. Granting the „limited degree of confidence” rating leads to a set of recommendations considered essential, possibly accompanied by recommendations with preventive and/or desirable character.

2. Granting the „*non-confidence*” rating indicates the fact that there are substantial evidence related to serious and fundamental deficiencies of the institutional capacity to ensure and maintain the quality of the programmes and standards of diploma certification/granting, at institutional level as well as at the level of study programmes. The decision shall be accompanied by a significant number of examples and recommendations considered to be essential and also a number of recommendations considered preventive and that should be respected in order to allow the granting, after another evaluation, of an improved rating. **The non-fulfilment of the compulsory normative requirements for the study programmes and at institutional level is a serious reason for the Agency to give the „non-confidence” rating.**