EUA Audit of ARACIS
(Agenția Română de Asigurarea a Calității în Învățământul Superior)

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1. Introduction

1.1 Executive summary

The European University Association (EUA) was invited to conduct an audit of ARACIS (*Agenția Română de Asigurarea a Calității în Învățământul Superior* – the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). This took place during the academic year 2007 - 2008.

The audit process included a number of main elements:

- a self-evaluation exercise and report;

- two site visits by an external review panel, appointed by EUA;

- a report of the external review panel;

- consideration of the report of the panel and the development of a quality improvement plan to implement the recommendations in the report, by ARACIS.

The main aim of the audit process was to provide professional support to ARACIS in the further development of its QA methodology and practice, and to prepare ARACIS in its application to become a full member of ENQA and actively participate in European wide projects.

The specific objectives were to assess:

- The quality assurance experience that had previously been accrued by the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA - the predecessor organisation to ARACIS) and the improvements brought about by ARACIS, through an examination of its new procedures and methodologies, their applications and the results;

- The compliance of the agency with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Having examined the evidence carefully, and conducted extensive discussions with key players and stakeholders in ARACIS's structures and activities, the panel considers that ARACIS as an agency has accrued and continues to accrue significant experience in the planning, preparation, implementation and follow-up of a wide range of quality assurance activities in Romania, in cooperation with Romanian higher education institutions.

Through the ongoing positive developments, application and outcomes of its procedures and methodologies, ARACIS is contributing substantially to improving the overall quality of higher education in Romania, and should continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, having examined this evidence in conjunction with each of the ESG standards in Part 3, it is the external panel's considered opinion that ARACIS is substantially compliant with the ESG. It is recommended that ARACIS should be admitted as a full member to the European Quality Assurance Register.

In these perspectives, the EUA panel has presented a number of recommendations which it considers will assist ARACIS in achieving its various objectives and contributing to the ongoing process of quality improvement in Romanian higher education.

1.2 Composition of panel

EUA appointed a panel of three members and a secretary to undertake the audit. The choice of panel members took into consideration national origins and professional experience in order to achieve an appropriate mix of expertise and backgrounds. The panel included three European senior higher education leaders, one of whom chaired the panel, and a secretary. All four panel members have extensive evaluation experience and knowledge of the European Standards and Guidelines.

The panel members were:
- Jürgen Kohler, panel chair, former Rector of Greifswald University, Germany, member of the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme pool of evaluators, former chair of the German Accreditation Council, member and former bureau member of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research;
- Thierry Malan, Honorary Inspector General of administration of Education and Research (former member of the IGAENR - Ministry of National Education and Research), France;
- Lesley Wilson, EUA Secretary General, former director of the UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES), former head of strategy at the European Science Foundation, former director of the EC Tempus office;
- Lewis Purser, panel secretary, director for academic affairs at the Irish Universities Association, member of EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme pool of evaluators.

1.3. Terms of reference

1.3.1 Reasons for commissioning the audit

The main aim of the audit process was to provide professional support to ARACIS in the further development of its QA methodology and practice, and to prepare ARACIS in its application to become a full member of ENQA (it has been a candidate member since May 2007), of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and actively participate in European-wide projects.

The specific objectives were to assess:

- The quality assurance experience that had been accrued by the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA), the predecessor organisation to ARACIS) and the improvements brought about by ARACIS, through an examination of its new procedures and methodologies, their applications and the results;

- ARACIS's compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines.

Initially these objectives were to be achieved within an advisory process, however in the course of the process the opportunity for ARACIS to use this audit for external QA purposes

became apparent, particularly for ARACIS's objective of becoming a full member of ENQA and EQAR.

1.3.2 Purpose and scope of audit

To meet the strategic needs of the ARACIS at this stage of its development, the audit had three distinct but related purposes.

First, the audit was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of ARACIS's performance since its establishment, having particular regard to the policies and procedures that ARACIS has developed and how they are being implemented and operated. In particular, it looked at how ARACIS is serving its stakeholders, primarily the university staff and students, in addition to external stakeholders such as employers and the general public.

Second, the audit was designed to be developmental, in order to assist ARACIS in achieving its own quality enhancement goals and to further develop its own internal quality culture. In this connection, it considered the organisational structures and processes of the ARACIS secretariat as it currently operates and evaluated its suitability in the context of ARACIS's developing role. Thus, it focused on the mission of ARACIS and the norms and goals of the organisation. It is envisaged that the process will assist ARACIS in identifying any constraints or opportunities that arise for the organisation in meeting its aims and goals. The audit aimed to achieve this by facilitating reflection on:

- The mission, aims and objectives of ARACIS and the systems and procedures in place and their suitability to fulfilling the mission;
- The quality measures in use including feedback from stakeholders, both internal and external;
- Strategic planning procedures and the capacity to change and meet new challenges.

Third, the audit had a particular focus on ARACIS's role as a quality assurance agency in the Romanian higher education, against the backdrop of developments in the European Higher Education Area.

In order to address the various purposes of the audit in a thorough manner, the audit was organised around three distinct strands:

- *Strand 1: Review of performance, organisation and structures of the secretariat and board of ARACIS*

   As ARACIS develops, the need has arisen for an audit of the systems and structures that are in place. The EUA audit examined and evaluated the suitability of the organisational structures in place for the conduct of accreditations.

- *Strand 2: Review of the accreditation methodology and procedures*

   This strand examined the accreditation methodology and procedures put in place since the establishment of ARACIS and the improvement brought to the previous CNEAA procedures. It evaluated the extent to which these meet the mission and goals of the organisation and how these accreditation exercises are perceived by the higher education sector, the students, the employers and the general public.

- *Strand 3: Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

This strand of the audit evaluated the extent to which ARACIS complies with the standards for external quality assurance agencies as set out in the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Strand 3 is therefore is a type B evaluation, as defined in the ENQA *Guidelines for national reviews of ENQA member agencies* p. 7. The evaluation criteria against which the review panel assessed ARACIS in this strand were the ESG Part 3, *European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies*. The panel also examined and assessed ARACIS's operations and performance according to ESG Part 2, *European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education*, although this is not strictly required for ENQA and EQAR membership purposes.

The full terms of reference for the audit can be found in Annex 1.

1.4 Main stages of review

The audit took place over four main stages. These were:

1.4.1 Self-evaluation

ARACIS was responsible for writing a self-evaluation report. Based on the ENQA *Guidelines for National Reviews*, the self-evaluation report included the context and aims of the evaluation, a description of ARACIS and its legal basis, an outline of the Romanian higher education system and the role of ARACIS within this, and a step-by-step analysis of ARACIS use of ESG Parts 2 and 3. The self-evaluation report concluded with a summary of observations and the recommendations reached during the self-evaluation exercise, and was accompanied by extensive annexes. These included an independent evaluation report on the pilot phase of ARACIS external evaluation activity, published in 2007; the relevant legislation; ARACIS policies, methodologies and user guides; data regarding previous accreditation activity in Romania; the code of professional ethics, and further information about the Romanian higher education system.

The self-evaluation phase for the EUA external review was based on the outcomes of the independent evaluation report, undertaken by a team of independent Romanian experts and finalised in September 2007. Following wide discussion within ARACIS and with relevant stakeholders, the 2007 report was converted into an ARACIS policy matrix, and then formed the basis for the self-evaluation phase for the EUA external review. The self-evaluation report was approved by the ARACIS council and sent to EUA in December 2007.

The EUA panel would like to record its positive appreciation of the self evaluation report and accompanying documents, which were written in an open, analytical and useful way, allowing for a good initial understanding of the issues, and for high quality interaction with all those met during the site visits.

1.4.2 Site visits

The EUA panel made a first site visit to ARACIS from 6-8 February 2008, in order to verify the validity of information contained in the self-evaluation report, and to explore further the main issues regarding ARACIS operations, its relations with universities and other stakeholders, and its work in relation to the ESG.

A second site visit was made, also to ARACIS offices in Bucharest, from 13-16 May 2008, in order to explore further the main issues identified by the EUA panel during its first visit.

The EUA panel was responsible for determining the duration and content of both visits, including the outline list of organisations, institutions and persons which it wished to meet. ARACIS provided the local administrative support for the site visits, including the organisation of interviews, meeting rooms for the panel and interviews. The panel would like to record its appreciation of the helpful and efficient interaction with ARACIS staff and board members during this process. The complete visit schedules can be found in Annex 2.

At the end of the site visit, the EUA review panel delivered a brief oral report of its major findings to the ARACIS executive board and contact person.

1.4.3 External report and quality improvement plan

In conformity with the terms of reference for the audit, the EUA panel was responsible for delivering this evaluation report following the end of the site visits. The draft evaluation report was drawn up by the panel secretary based on the findings of the panel. Panel members then commented on the draft and the finalised draft was sent to ARACIS to check for factual errors. The EUA panel finalised the report after making the necessary factual corrections, and sent it back to ARACIS.

According to the terms of reference, ARACIS will then consider the panel's report, and develop a quality improvement plan to implement the recommendations in the report. The panel's report and the quality improvement plan will both be published.

1.4.4 Basis for evidence gathered

The review panel collected information by:
- studying the self-evaluation report, annexes and other documents relevant to the operation of ARACIS, including the ARACIS website;
- studying the independent evaluation report of the pilot ARACIS phase of activity, undertaken by a team of independent Romanian experts and finalised in September 2007. This report was included among the annexes with the ARACIS self-evaluation report;
- two site visits to ARACIS.

During the site visits, meetings and interviews were held with:
- ARACIS executive board and council members and management staff;
- ARACIS technical staff;

- ARACIS expert commission members active in the pilot phase;
- representatives of universities involved in the pilot phase;
- representatives of students, including students involved in the pilot phase;
- representatives of Parliamentary Education Committees;
- representatives of the National Council of Rectors;
- representatives of employers;
- the Minister of Education;
- experts working at the funding authority of the Ministry of Education;
- members of the "*Presidential Commission for the analysis and elaboration of policies in the fields of education and research*".

2. Context and constraints of quality assurance for the Romanian higher education system

In evaluating the effectiveness of ARACIS's performance, it is important to consider the environment in which it is operating and the external constraints it faces in attempting to reach its goals and objectives.

In the opinion of the review team, ARACIS's work is conditioned by two important external factors. The first of these is the need to manage, from a quality assurance perspective, a higher education system which has expanded more rapidly than is sustainable. The uncontrolled expansion of the system in the first half of the 1990s, driven by market forces but with little regulatory capacity, has led to a system which *de facto* is vastly varied from the quality assurance perspective, but in which *de jure* no differentiation has existed until recently. The second of these external environmental factors is the previous (CNEAA) input-based methodology for accreditation and quality assurance, and the need to move this towards a learning outcomes and competence-based approach.

It should be noted that, in order for ARACIS to achieve success in overcoming these challenges, it will need to ensure that there is improved clarity in the communication of concepts regarding quality assurance and quality improvement matters across Romanian higher education and its stakeholders. This will involve the consistent use of precise and well-understood terminology, expanding on present legal definitions (articles 2, 3 and 4 of Law/Government Emergency Ordinance 75/2005) and the terminological work conducted and published by ARACIS (*Quality assurance and accreditation - glossary of basic terms and definitions* (2007): a revised and updated version of the glossary published under the auspices of UNESCO-CEPES in 2004).

2.1. Context of quality assurance

2.1.1 Romanian quality assurance context and structures

ARACIS began operations in 2005, under the legal provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance (GEO) no. 75/2005 regarding Quality Assurance in Education. In April 2006 some provisions of this Ordinance were modified by Parliament and the ordinance was adopted and became law.

The provisions of this law were designed to include and comply with the ESG principles and standards, which had been adopted in 2005 by European ministers at their Bologna process conference in Bergen.

ARACIS is the successor agency to the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA), a previous quality assurance and accreditation body which was established by law in 1993 (Law 88/1993 on accreditation of higher education institutions and recognition of diplomas), provisionally to authorise and accredit higher education institutions in Romania. CNEAA was one of the earliest bodies of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe, and was intended to respond to the mushrooming of private higher education initiatives which had taken place in Romania in the early years of the post-communist period. The CNEAA criteria however were essentially of an input nature, and despite considerable public and academic unease, 27 private and two new public higher education institutions were accredited during the period 1993-2004. CNEAA ceased its activities after adoption of the 2005 GEO and creation of ARACIS

All previously existing public universities continued to operate during this same period, many of them expanding considerably their supply of study programmes and "specialisations", with accreditation from CNEAA.

The 2006 law provides a more modern approach to quality assurance across Romanian education, with complementary operations between schools (pre-university) and higher education, and a greater focus on quality assurance and learning outcomes. The accreditation function of ARACIS is maintained as part of a broader quality assurance and improvement methodology, to ensure initial compliance with minimum standards and progressive quality enhancement.

Under existing legislation, ARACIS is the only body in Romania competent to propose the authorisation, respectively the accreditation, of a higher education provider and its academic programmes (Article 17(1-b) of the Law).

The Law mentions the existence of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and Article 22 states that ARACIS shall take all steps to become enrolled in EQAR and submit periodically to the international accreditation procedures. It is crucial therefore for ARACIS to ensure that it is included on this Register. Article 23(2) even states that "if ARACIS is removed from EQAR, then it shall cease to exist in law, as well".

For external evaluations of quality assurance, however, Romanian higher education institutions may also apply to other institutions. Article 23(1)of the Law states that accredited Romanian HEIs may seek external periodic quality assessment either from ARACIS or from any other QA agency, national or international (located either within or outside Romania), included on the European Register. Article 33(3) states that "the accredited education provider shall be externally assessed every 5 years by ARACIS, or by any other national or international agency, according to the agreements concluded".

As a result ARACIS will certainly be open to competition at some stage in the future from other agencies included in the European Quality Assurance Register, which may be invited by Romanian higher education institutions to undertake external quality evaluations, in line with provisions in the legislation. The European framework is therefore a key reference for the future of ARACIS.

Despite the many rapid and far reaching changes which Romanian higher education has undergone since 1990, some of which are alluded to in this report, a number of major challenges are still inherent in the system.

These include factors linked to demographic developments, with a forecast reduction of 40% in the 18-25 year old age cohort between 2005 and 2020. A second system-wide challenge is the ever more rapid pace of labour market change, as Romania seeks to respond to globalisation and increased competition. These challenges, which involve an inevitable reduction in first time higher education learners, invite various policy responses, including the need for institutional differentiation and profiling and for an increase in focus on lifelong learning in its different forms, together with an increased focus on master and doctoral levels. ARACIS will need to ensure that its own policies and procedures are adequate to support these future policy responses.

One of the inbuilt constraints in the Romanian HE system in moving forward from the current situation is its traditional legislative context. Together with recent modernisation, there is, as in a number of other European countries, a continuing history of legislating for quality. Such legislation can be positive in that it provides clarity, and adds credence and authority to ARACIS activities, and supports the system in its early years. However, extensive detailed legislation can also lead to difficulties for the agency through not being sufficiently responsive and flexible, and can therefore also act as a constraint in an improvement-oriented philosophy.

The legislative basis for accreditation is also complicated by the different layers of legislation. Universities which existed prior to 1990 are deemed to be accredited; some post-1990 institutions are accredited under specific laws, while a number of additional institutions are currently seeking accreditation through additional individual legislation. The panel was informed that many members of the relevant Romanian parliamentary commissions, particularly of the Senate which takes greater interest in higher education, are university professors, from both public and private institutions, and the preparation of legislation can therefore take unpredictable turns.

Likewise, the tradition of an "approved list" (by the Ministry) of "specialisations" presents a challenge to the ongoing modernisation of Romanian higher education. Its good aspect is that it lends public endorsement and brings clarity to this level of educational supply, but it can also lead to inflexibility, conservatism and a slow pace of modernisation. In the new Romanian HE structures incorporating the Bologna three cycle degree structures, this list of "specialisations" is redefined in terms of these new degree structures, but is not replaced. Such a system may place considerable bureaucratic barriers to innovation, the supply of diverse and dynamic education and research programmes, and the ability to respond rapidly to academic and labour force needs. These barriers should be considered in the overall context of upskilling the Romanian labour force and raising overall levels of educational attainment, including the education and training for young researchers in Romania – activities which are all essential for Romanian economic development, and also for the competitivity and attractiveness of Romanian universities.

Finally, given these multiple changes in the higher education system and the central role of ARACIS in ensuring the quality of the system, the importance of maintaining close links with a number of other relevant national agencies in Romania is crucial. These include ARACIP (the sister agency for quality in school education, created by the same 2005 Law/GEO), the National Higher Education Research Council (CNCSIS), the National Higher Education Funding Council (CNFIS), the National Authority for Scientific Research (ANCS) and with professional accreditation bodies. It is vital that close technical and policy cooperation

continue between ARACIS and these and other relevant bodies, and that scope for greater coherence and possible synergies be identified.

2.1.2 ARACIS mission and activities

The stated main objective of ARACIS is to assure and improve the quality of the Romanian higher education system, in accordance with European principles and concepts, through assessment, evaluation, organisation, development, cooperation and implementation.

ARACIS is an autonomous public institution, of national interest, a legal entity with its own income and expenditure budget (Law/GEO 75/2005, article 16), with the status of an independent agency. It is led by a council of 15 members, each appointed for a three year period, with a rolling system of replacement according to article 19 of the Law. Rectors and all persons holding official positions within the Presidency, Government or Parliament of Romania are not allowed to be members of the Council. ARACIS is managed by an executive board, composed of five Council members.

Under the 2005 Ordinance and 2006 Law, ARACIS inherited all the contractual rights and obligations of the former CNEAA, as well as its technical infrastructure, staff and databases. ARACIS therefore carries the legacy of CNEAA's successes and shortcomings, and its activities must be both forward looking to assist Romanian higher education with current and future challenges, and capable of resolving issues still open from previous years.

The main activities of ARACIS can be summarised into two main groups:
1. Initial accreditation:
- Temporary authorisation of study programmes;
- Accreditation of study programmes;
- Temporary authorisation of a higher education institution;
- Accreditation of a higher education institution;
2. Ongoing quality assurance:
- External evaluation of quality assurance for study programmes;
- External evaluation of quality assurance for higher education institutions;
- External evaluation of teacher training departments;
- External evaluation of distance learning study programmes.

Following the 2006 legislation, the new ARACIS methodology and guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes and institutions were piloted in eleven universities during 2006-07. Apart from the detailed outcomes for each participating university, this exercise also resulted in an independent monitoring and evaluation report, as noted above. Following consideration of this report, the ARACIS methodology was revised, leading to a greater focus on institutional quality culture.

2.1.3 From input to output-oriented quality assurance

As noted in the self-evaluation report, ARACIS is at an important initial stage of implementing its new outcomes-oriented and results-based external evaluation, key to the promotion of an effective quality culture in Romanian higher education.

The 2005 Law/GEO states:

- Article 7(1): *Quality assurance in the field of education shall be mainly focussed on the output*;
- Article 7(2): *The output shall be expressed in skills, competences, values and attitudes that can be assimilated after attending and completing an education level or a training programme*.

In parallel to the development of a modern quality assurance framework for Romanian higher education, a concept and methodology for a Romanian national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is also at an advanced stage of preparation. The NFQ should provide authoritative statements on levels, outcomes, descriptors, etc, for Romanian higher education, and ensure calibration across the entire education system. The NFQ is vital for the European alignment and recognition of Romanian qualifications, and will act as a strong anchor for HE quality assurance work also.

Given that effective quality assurance is essential in underpinning the operations and reliability of any framework of qualifications, the links between this national framework and Romanian higher education quality assurance and accreditation activities are important, and will need considerable attention over the coming period.

The developments in these areas in Romania mirror those underway in most European countries at the time of the external review, and the future alignment of the Romanian NFQ with the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area and with the European Qualifications Framework will be important steps in ensuring the full comparability and compatibility of Romanian qualifications with those of other countries across Europe.

2.1.4 Engagement with European quality assurance mechanisms

ARACIS is a candidate member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since May 2007, and a member of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEE Network).

As such, ARACIS (and its predecessor) has been aware of and exposed to the development of the ESG since their inception. The fact that the relevant Romanian legislation was finalised in 2006, after the adoption of the ESG, means that they were taken as a key reference in the law, and provide the context for the development of quality in Romanian higher education. ARACIS has actively promoted and followed-up these European QA developments in Romanian higher education since its creation, and in 2007 was selected to take part in EUA's QAHECA project, promoting cooperation between QA agencies and higher education institutions at European level. This work is crucial in the context of the ongoing embedding of Romanian higher education in the European Higher Education Area.

A number of Romanian universities have participated in European quality assurance activities, including the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme and the EUA Quality Culture project. Many institutions have participated in EC funded projects with links to quality assurance in a variety of academic or administrative fields.

2.2. Context and constraints for the Romanian HE system in the EHEA

2.2.1 System differentiation and institutional profiles

As noted above, the Romanian higher education system expanded rapidly and in a relatively uncontrolled manner during the early 1990s. Following the creation of CNEAA and the introduction of an accreditation mechanism to ensure basic minimum standards in this situation, during the period 1993 – 2004 CNEAA received 223 requests from private higher education operators for provisional authorisation, of which 87 were approved. As of 2008, there are currently 56 public universities and 27 accredited private universities in Romania, as well as an additional 26 private institutions which are still provisionally authorised to provide higher education services (for a period of three years from the date of authorisation) and which must then be accredited if they wish to continue in operation.

However, the legislation in place has resulted in a situation where, once accredited using the input-dominated methodology of the CNEAA period, all types of Romanian higher education institutions are considered the same. This means that there is no formal differentiation depending on the profile of an institution, the relative size of its student body, its research/teaching balance, its role in national, regional or local life, or any other such characteristics.

This formal situation is compounded by the fact that there is considerable uniformity of mission statements across the entire range of Romanian HEIs, demonstrating limited levels of institutional development and limited capacity for differentiation. Conversely, diversity at programme level is maintained in an artificial way through a multiplication of narrowly defined study programmes and "specialisations", each of which must comply with nationally defined and controlled input parameters, removing most of the benefits such diversification might have on the dynamism and forward-looking development of higher education.

In terms of quality assurance, one consequence of this is that CNEAA, followed by ARACIS, has been obliged to develop detailed reference standards across a wide variety of subject areas. These standards apply to all types of institutions but, given the current environment, their main purpose would appear to be an attempt to ensure minimum standards for the weakest 20% or so of these institutions, which were successful in gaining initial CNEAA authorisation or accreditation through compliance with the input standards, but where the EUA review panel was led to believe that many doubts still remain in public perception as to their real quality.

While in the current context such an approach is understandable and indeed necessary, it presents an anomaly for the longer-term future of Romanian higher education. It is fundamentally at odds with one based on the principles of institutional autonomy and responsibility, where good institutions will, in an open and transparent way, seek continuously to ensure that their own teaching, research, infrastructure and support services are of a high standard, using best national and international benchmarks and advice. It also works against the effective diversification of higher education in Romania, since all providers are obliged to comply with the same demands regarding input standards and indicators. The real benefits of a differentiated, dynamic and forward-looking higher education system are therefore lost in the details of one-size-fits-all standards and indicators.

The review panel was informed of a strong political commitment, based on the outcomes of the recent work of the Presidential Commission on education and research, to improving

quality in higher education, including increasing financial support for education to at least 6% of GDP from 2007, a target which has already been met. This substantial increase in funding is linked to a move towards quality criteria rather than per capita inputs (with up to 30% of state financing based on quality criteria), and a focus on greater concentration and differentiation of the system.

2.2.2 Learning outcomes and competences

As already noted, ARACIS inherited an input-based methodology and understanding of quality assurance from the previous CNEAA structure. It should, however, also be noted that such an approach, based on input factors, was in fact the traditional measure of quality assurance in Romania and most countries of Europe for past decades. The explicit focus on student learning outcomes and acquired competences is recent, and has been stimulated at European level by the Bologna process and its increased focus on mechanisms such as ECTS which encourage such an approach.

The Bologna process is also responsible for the pan-European development of National Frameworks of Qualifications (NFQ). These frameworks are part of the "Bologna architecture" of developing compatible and understandable degree structures across Europe, designed to help make qualifications more transparent and learning paths more flexible. They build on tools such as ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, and like these, are based on the concept of learning outcomes rather than educational input factors. An overarching Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was formally adopted at the Bologna process ministerial conference in Bergen, 2005, and the more recent European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL), developed by the EU within the Lisbon Strategy and fully compatible with the Bologna QF, has also been adopted, covering all levels and areas of education and training systems.

In 2005 each Bologna country agreed to start developing its own qualifications framework within this overarching EHEA framework, with the goal that, little by little, all qualifications across each higher education system in Europe can be mapped for the benefit of learners and wider society. As already noted, a concept and methodology for a Romanian NFQ is at an advanced stage of preparation, which will provide authoritative statements on levels, outcomes and descriptors for Romanian higher education, ensuring calibration across the entire education system, and establishing an explicit focus on the outcomes of, rather than inputs to, the learning process. The move from the old CNEAA criteria to a new ARACIS methodology must, therefore, go hand-in-hand with the development and implementation of the Romanian NFQ. However, since the Romanian NFQ is not yet formally in place, ARACIS has had to cope with the need to develop and assess level-specific criteria on its own accord, bearing the European concepts in mind.

Linked to the focus on learning outcomes is the issue of learner competences. These competences are likewise essential to an effective NFQ, and should be covered, at a generic level, through the descriptors for each level in the Framework, coherently aligned with the desired learning outcomes. The Council of Europe promotes a simple approach to the most generic competences, in four areas essential for the successful functioning of higher education. These were taken up in the Bologna process by the London Communiqué of 2007, and cover competences for the European labour market, for active citizenship, for maintaining and advancing a broad knowledge base through study and research, and for continued personal development. All of these can serve as useful starting points for the

development of more detailed competences and learning outcomes appropriate to each respective level in an NFQ.

Given the scope of the audit, the panel did not examine the reference standards which have been developed by specialised ARACIS committees in each large disciplinary area. However, discussions with many varied participants during the course of the panel's two visits showed the importance and necessity for making the learning outcomes and competences which are provided in all these documents more visible, understood and effective, both for institutions and for expert evaluators. At the same time, there is a need to clarify to what extent these reference standards are normatively binding, or rather for use as reference points which may be deviated from if there are valid reasons for doing so.

The experience reported from the pilot phase of institutional evaluations was that it was difficult to evaluate learning outcomes at an institutional level, given the variations within each university, and since the evaluation methodology, as practiced, did not support such an approach. It is also true that evaluating learning outcomes will remain difficult as long as these are not included in national degree cycle descriptors and fully integrated into the conceptual development of study programmes and student assessment procedures.

This is a long-term process, part of the broader cultural change which Romanian higher education (and higher education in other countries) is going through as part of its move to the overall learning outcomes concept. Institutions will need to identify their own benchmark requirements, consistent with the generic elements of the NFQ, based on their individual contexts and desired learning outcomes, and use them strategically as part of their own institutional and programme profiling.

2.2.3 Implementation of the three-cycle structure

The first series of new master programmes (Bologna 2nd cycle) at Romanian universities will start in autumn 2008 for the first generation of students graduating from the new three-year bachelor programmes. Only accredited master programmes will be allowed to operate, and ARACIS has been working closely with the universities in this respect. The review panel heard how many universities had initially been quite reluctant to undertake a self-evaluation exercise regarding their master programmes and that there had been a political discussion as to whether or not programmes beyond the bachelor level should be subject to accreditation or evaluation at all, but that those who underwent evaluations were pleased with what they learned.

This situation in Romania is similar to that in many other European countries implementing the Bologna three-cycle structures. However, while ARACIS undertakes this accreditation activity, there is also a process controlled by the Ministry, following the old centralised bureaucratic tradition already noted, whereby all "specialisation" programmes are tightly regulated both in terms of title and content. The panel heard arguments proposing that accredited universities should be responsible in an autonomous way for their own master programmes. These arguments are based on examples from national systems, in Europe and elsewhere, where universities benefit from greater autonomy and where the master degree has developed over a longer period. These arguments also follow recent developments in a number of other European countries which are moving towards systems of accredited institutions taking much greater institutional responsibility for their own programmes.

The immediate issue at master level for Romanian higher education appears to the review panel to be the lack of preparedness by the system in general to provide new and suitable second cycle degree programmes for students graduating over the next years from the Bologna bachelor degrees. This situation includes the delays by the Ministry in issuing its regulations regarding the second cycle and an official list of specialisations (which the panel states as a matter of fact and not as a value statement on necessity or expediency), the slow pace by many universities in proposing and developing master programmes for potential students and moving these to a phase when they are ready to be presented for accreditation, the lack of dialogue by universities in this planning process with employers and other relevant stakeholders, and the ensuing pressure on ARACIS to ensure that the accreditation process can indeed, where suitable, take place in the short time available. The master level would certainly appear to be the current weak link in the Romanian higher education chain. However, the recent positive experiences of those universities who have prepared master programmes for the academic year 2008-09, and of ARACIS, provide a basis for ensuring that this link is strengthened over the coming years.

The master cycle is of course linked in a variety of ways to the research funding system and to the doctorate, and it is important to ensure that these different elements remain coherent, within an overarching quality concept. The evaluation panel noted that ARACIS was still in the process of defining the quality assurance approach for the third cycle. In this process, ARACIS should work in close coordination with the National Council for Research in Higher Education, which accredits and funds research centres.

2.2.4 Role of students

Students play a key role in quality assurance matters. As the primary beneficiaries of higher education processes, they are best placed to provide feedback on the quality of teaching, the learning environment, and other services provided. As active participants in these processes, they should also be involved in the planning, implementation and follow-up of quality assurance activities. Institutions and agencies have a responsibility to include students in quality assurance activities, and students have a responsibility to engage with and contribute to such activities.

The role of students in quality assurance and improvement matters has been emphasised in recent years as part of the Bologna process, and many European countries, institutions and student organisations are working to promote this and improve effective student participation in these areas. The reality in many cases is that, while students were rarely excluded from such activity, they were not, until recently, systematically included. Participation depended on pro-active student engagement, often involving considerable effort, or on the initiative of individual staff members, but was rarely coherent or coordinated at a broader level. This cultural change of perception regarding the role of students in these matters is also underway in Romania, but as in other countries there are many strong traditions which mean that a number of years will be needed in order to ensure sustainable change in this area.

The EUA panel was informed that the status and role of students at ARACIS was viewed by and large as being positive. Students are involved at many levels of quality assurance activity across Romanian higher education, and contribute more specifically to the work and overall objectives of the agency through participation in institutional external evaluation teams, where their report is integrated into the overall team report. However, they are not members of the external teams for programme evaluation. Neither are they members of the ARACIS Council, since the initial proposal to include them was turned down by Parliament.

The student representatives met during the EUA panel's site visits provided clear insights into the current challenges facing the broad role of students in quality assurance in Romanian higher education .These include:
- The need for institutions to focus on identifying and addressing quality concerns and problems internally, rather than concentrating on issues linked to external QA;
- The need for improved tools to identify the opinions and perceptions of students;
- The challenges resulting from low levels of student participation in feedback mechanisms;
- The need to stimulate more professors to involve students in internal QA and to provide feedback to students;
- The need for faculties which do organise student feedback mechanisms to publish the results of these, so that both students and teachers can see the outcomes of their efforts.

Regarding student involvement in ARACIS evaluation teams, a number of more technical issues became apparent. These include the need for better standardised tools for gathering feedback during the visits; the importance for the ARACIS teams to meet a normal cross-section of students on site, in addition to the delegated student representatives; the need for all ARACIS evaluators to maintain an emphasis on the student-focused performance indicators in the methodology, rather than expecting student team members to focus exclusively on these; and the need for the student contributions to the overall team report to be treated more systematically as this report is finalised.

2.3. Impact on the organisation, structures, methodology and performance of ARACIS

2.3.1 Improvement orientation

The 2005 Law which allowed for the creation of ARACIS intended it to operate as a regulatory mechanism to continue with the process of ensuring minimum standards for all operating higher education institutions. As already noted, the focus until now has been on compliance with these standards. Although the ARACIS methodology could be interpreted and implemented in a more improvement-oriented manner, the combined behavioural traditions of Romanian higher education institutions and of the ARACIS external evaluation/accreditation experts (many of whom were inherited from CNEAA), mean that the dominant approach so far has been a continuation of this focus on compliance. It should also be recognised that, so far, only a limited proportion of Romanian Higher Education Institutions and their study programmes has been evaluated under the provisions of the 2006 legislation, so that some focus on compliance will continue to be necessary over the coming years

While it is clear that the current Romanian context requires standards, in order to continue the work required to raise the minimum levels of providers already authorised or accredited through the previous system, in the opinion of the review panel the use of these standards now already needs to move in concept and practice towards a methodological focus on improvement. Given the changing national and European contexts, it is natural for the role of ARACIS also to evolve over time, and one aspect of this should be an increased focus on quality improvement in order to improve quality levels.

Although documents can be rewritten to move away from a concept of compliance with reference standards to one of improvement orientation, communicating and implementing such a cultural change within a broad range of institutions and across large numbers of expert, evaluators will require a number of years to ensure that this also occurs in practice.

This cultural change also needs to be accompanied by a shift towards greater mutual trust and confidence across the Romanian higher education system. The current limited levels of trust are reflected in the approach to institutional QA, highlighting the relatively weak role of institutions and the strong role of individuals and programmes.

This reliance on a standards-base compliance approach is also evidenced by the elements of confusion which exist among many ARACIS stakeholder groups regarding key terminology: reference standards, performance indicators, external quality assurance, accreditation, etc. In moving towards an improvement-oriented system, it will be important to ensure fully consistent use of terminology both spoken and written, in order to facilitate a better understanding among key stakeholder groups and the wider public of the various elements in the quality assurance process. Greater use and understanding of the ARACIS glossary, published in 2007, is therefore a priority.

The panel was informed that the existing ARACIS guidelines were produced in a very short period of time, due to legislative pressure. Draft guidelines were posted on ARACIS website for general feedback from stakeholders, but there was not enough time or consultation for extensive feedback to be provided in a meaningful way. The result is that some of the guidelines are redundant, others overlap, etc. The panel learned that a second round of consultation with institutions was to take place regarding the guidelines, and that additional training with new groups of ARACIS expert evaluators would be provided, to ensure that these evaluators are fully up to date with revised guidelines. ARACIS should use these and other opportunities to ensure that clear moves are made towards use of the guidelines in an improvement-oriented manner, breaking with the previous traditional focus on compliance with prescriptive minimum standards.

2.3.2 Structures and resources

The issue of staffing and professionalisation in the field of quality assurance is relevant across many countries of Europe, but it is central to the future and the modernisation of Romanian higher education. This applies equally to individual institutions as well as to ARACIS, and involves both structures and resources, and human resource questions such as recruitment, promotions, staff development, etc.

This is part of a broader concept of developing a new cadre of professional higher education administrators, who will most likely have an academic background, but who are highly skilled and with special expertise in particular areas, e.g. in quality assurance. These professional administrators do not necessarily occupy an academic position, but assume leading positions of responsibility in many areas of the university, reporting to the institutional academic leadership. Such persons can frequently be found in key positions across many institutions in Northern Europe and North America, but are still rather rare in universities of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe.

Introducing this concept represents an important challenge in Romania, where traditionally most administrative responsibilities above a certain level have been assumed on a temporary, rotational basis by academics, either elected through the normal university structures or appointed by the elected leadership. This means that professors in different

academic fields often find themselves responsible for running a variety of offices, such as international relations, student services, information and communication, human resources, quality assurance, etc., usually with the best intentions and good background knowledge of these areas, but often with little specific expertise in managing – on a part-time, often unpaid, basis - an effective and efficient service function of the institution.

Conversely, given the traditional role of academics in assuming important administrative and management functions, the role of administrative technical staff has in most cases remained severely underdeveloped. This is reflected in both the job descriptions of these staff, but also in their status and salary. It therefore becomes difficult, in a dynamic labour market such as in Romania, to attract, train and, importantly, to retain well-qualified, energetic, independent thinking and ambitious younger staff, who will find many opportunities for career enhancement in the rapidly expanding private sector.

For a specialised agency such as ARACIS, these traditions represent a particular challenge. First, because it needs to win and maintain the confidence of its major stakeholders, the universities, the role of well known and highly respected university personalities in its leadership is therefore essential. Second, because it needs to distance itself from the former structures and practices associated with CNEAA, as acknowledged in the self-evaluation report, while inheriting through legislation all the contractual rights and obligations of CNEAA, including its staff, of which there are 35 technical positions as well as the directors of the various ARACIS departments and commissions. Third, and crucially, because the move in approach to quality from input-focused to output-oriented, from prescriptive minimum standards to quality improvement, and from programme to institution, requires change also in administrative and management functions and competences. Fourth, because ARACIS needs to operate not only at national but also at European level and this requires additional commitment, expertise and skills.

As mentioned, many of these challenges are shared by universities and higher education agencies across a number of European countries. It should be noted however that these countries are increasingly looking at how to overcome the concrete obstacles to reform in these areas, which in many cases are linked to public sector administrative structures and practices.

3. Compliance with the ESG

(and thereby with the ENQA membership criteria).

The external panel was impressed to find a very positive overall atmosphere at ARACIS, with enthusiastic and committed persons working at every level, including among external stakeholders. The desire to contribute to the overall improvement of Romanian higher education, fully integrated in the European higher education area, was evident in the positive energy and dynamism which the panel witnessed.

This positive and inclusive approach is also evidenced through ARACIS's request for the external panel to examine not just its compliance with the European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies (Part 3) but also with Part 2, for the external quality assurance of higher education.

3.1 Compliance with ESG Part 2: European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education

ESG Part 3.1 requires that the external quality assurance of agencies consider the presence and effectiveness of external quality assurance processes, as described in ESG Part 2. In this external audit of ARACIS, the panel therefore provides separate critical commentary and an opinion for each of the standards included in ESG Part 2.

The opinions expressed by the external panel below take into account the present stage of ARACIS's organisation, development, and accreditation and quality assurance activities. Like a number of other agencies across Europe, ARACIS has not yet had the opportunity to complete a first full cycle of activity, including follow-up reviews, or undertake system-wide analyses, and therefore a number of the standards and guidelines cannot yet be fully implemented.

In such cases, where the panel is satisfied that the other conditions for meeting these standards and guidelines have been met and that there is substantial credibility based on clarity and validity of concept that the agency will be able to meet quality standards in specific areas as and when these arise for the first time in the future, an opinion of "substantially compliant" is expressed.

As a consequence, the panel suggests that a focal part of the next external review of ARACIS should be to consider in more depth the conduct and implementation of activities related to 2.3 (application of decisions), 2.6 (follow-up activities) and 2.8 (system-wide analyses).

> *ESG 2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures: External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

ARACIS has taken a pro-active approach to the promotion and development of effective internal quality assurance processes at Romanian higher education institutions. It has been active in informing them of European and national methodologies and practices, and it has encouraged the promotion of internal quality policies, structures and methodologies, as part of a process of broader long-term cultural change with Romanian higher education. ARACIS's aim of enhancing internal QA within institutions is highlighted in its standards and procedures. The ARACIS external evaluation is focused on institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management, while also considering universities' application of the ESG for internal QA.

Opinion: fully compliant.

> *ESG 2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes: The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.*

The aims and objectives for the various elements of the ARACIS quality assurance process were made clear and published, and the process was then developed. This was a participative process, with the draft guidelines publicly available for feedback and comment

prior to finalisation. As previously noted, this was done under considerable legislative time pressure, so the amount of feedback received was limited.

These guidelines have been published in both Romanian and English, and include a description of the procedures to be used. Following the initial cycle of evaluations, the panel has been given to understand that ARACIS will ask for further feedback that can be used to improve the quality of the guidelines in the future.

In its self-evaluation report, ARACIS identified two shortcomings during the early phase of the development of these external quality assurance processes. The first of these is the need for greater training of ARACIS's external evaluators in the new approach to quality assurance which it is committed to implementing. The size of the Romanian HE system and the accreditation and quality assurance methodologies currently in place require a large number of such evaluators (the ARACIS register of experts currently includes around 1,300 persons). ARACIS has already made good efforts to widen its pool of experts and train these. A new innovative step is about to start to assist with the initial short-listing of potential experts through an online tool. This will then be complemented by an ambitious project funded through European Structural Funds for training 600 suitable experts over the period 2009-2012.

The second shortcoming identified by ARACIS is the way in which traditional collegiality and peer review culture is understood by some elements of Romanian higher education. This can result in the formal elements of an evaluation offering very limited or muted criticism, while informally negative opinions are spread and indiscrete comments are made to third parties. As ARACIS has noted, an important element of its development of external quality assurance processes will be to assist with a cultural change away from such traditional concepts towards a more open and explicit approach to personal and institutional responsibility and quality improvement.

The external panel would like to congratulate ARACIS for taking early and decisive steps to attract and train the best possible pool of national experts for external quality assurance. It will be essential to ensure that this pool includes important numbers of younger academics who have spent part of their careers abroad and who are involved in European and international networks. It will also be crucial to include greater numbers of evaluators from outside Romania, in order to ensure continuous benchmarking with similar activities in other countries. Furthermore, an expanded, refreshed and well trained expert pool will certainly encourage the cultural change just discussed.

Opinion: fully compliant.

> *ESG 2.3 Criteria for decisions: Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.*

The ARACIS criteria are explicit and published, and the external quality assurance activity is based on these.

The panel found that a standardised methodology and performance indicators are in place for use across all activities, and that fully trained directors are also in place to ensure that each activity is undertaken according to this methodology. The recorded evidence is obtained by each team using a standardised mechanism, and a moderating mechanism is provided by a specialised ARACIS commission, to which all draft reports in that subject area are submitted.

As noted above, ARACIS is putting in place a new system for training of external evaluators to ensure that these criteria are applied fully consistently. The experience gained by the specialised ARACIS commissions in moderating reports will also be important in generating high overall levels of consistency.

Opinion: substantially compliant.

ESG 2.4 Processes fit for purpose: All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

According to ARACIS's literature, its main objective is to assure and improve the quality of the Romanian higher education system, in accordance with European principles and concepts, through assessment, evaluation, organisation, development, cooperation and implementation.

Its core activities are the initial authorisation, the accreditation following initial authorisation, and the quality assurance and improvement of accredited higher education programmes and institutions in Romania. The same basic methodology is used for all these activities, although the specific criteria vary for different programmes and at institutional level.

Performance indicators are used as a basis for ARACIS's work. The use of such indicators has already been discussed, including the question of whether they really serve the long-term purpose of quality improvement. A number of specific indicators in use at present are designed to identify bad quality, rather than promote high quality.

As most of those institutions currently operating with provisional authorisation should seek full accreditation in the near future, and the number of new bachelor and master degrees submitted for provisional authorisation also decreases, ARACIS should think further about the role and purpose of institutional accreditation, and how a greater focus on quality improvement can be built into its work, thus adapting its processes to meet the changing nature of its work and the growing emphasis on promoting a quality culture of improvement.

For the modality of compiling evaluation reports, which is both a matter of due process and of reporting, see the discussion below under ESG 2.5.

Opinion: partially compliant.

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

ARACIS reports are published by the agency in electronic and hard copy versions. They are also generally published locally by the relevant institution. Each report contains a specific section with recommendations. Since the process is intended to be a supportive one to help each institution improve its activities, the report is therefore expected to be written from this perspective.

As noted in the ARACIS self-evaluation, however, the reports so far tend to include many descriptive and fewer analytical elements, and the language of the recommendations may not always be fully clear or understandable.

Drafting the institutional report involves separate contributions from the foreign evaluator, the student evaluator, the programme and institutional sections, all of which provide inputs to the overall ARACIS report. It should be noted that none of the individual team members are directly involved in drafting the overall report, which is conceived and written by the director of each evaluation mission. As yet there is no expert support available within the ARACIS technical staff for this task, although this is planned to change during the coming academic year. Neither is there an ARACIS procedure to ensure that the views of all team members are included or that the entire team is satisfied with the draft. This depends entirely on the team leadership.

The relevant ARACIS permanent commission (responsible for each major subject area or for institutional evaluations) then has the responsibility to moderate the draft report, at which stage significant changes can be introduced. The final draft report is then sent to the institution for feedback. Once the report has been finalised, the ARACIS Council then makes a final decision, and the final report and decision is sent to the Ministry.

As may be seen, the report drafting process is a complicated one, with various written inputs by different members of the expert panel, but with significant moderating power accorded to the relevant ARACIS permanent commission, with no final sign-off by expert panel members themselves for the report. The EUA panel therefore recommends that a simplified and more transparent approach to the drafting of ARACIS reports be devised, which will also focus on providing clear and easily understandable analysis and recommendations. Likewise, the report should benefit from greater shared ownership by the respective expert panel. In particular, the role of the student in the elaboration of reports and conclusion of assessment could be enhanced. More effective debriefing sessions at the end of the site visit could be used to gather key messages quickly and build a basis for the report. It is important for those actors in possession of the evidence to be as close as possible to those reaching the decision; otherwise the nuances get lost or confused.

Opinion: partially compliant.

> *ESG 2.6 Follow-up procedures: Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.*

The 2006 Law and the ARACIS methodology provide for ARACIS to set follow-up procedures and conditions after each evaluation, as appropriate. This can be in the form of a work plan proposed by the institution and agreed by ARACIS. These follow-up procedures so far concern instances where the ARACIS accreditation decision is a conditional one. In these cases, the follow-up procedures have been implemented consistently.

As the focus of its activities continues to move towards quality assurance and improvement, ARACIS will also need to develop follow-up procedures for recommendations arising from these.

Opinion: substantially compliant.

ESG 2.7 Periodic reviews: External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

The legal requirement for external quality evaluation is every five years. This has been published and is well known within Romanian higher education. The procedures for the pilot phase of institutional reviews are clearly defined and have been published. It is expected that these procedures may be modified in advance of the second cycle of reviews.

Opinion: fully compliant.

ESG 2.8 System-wide analyses: Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analyzing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc

This function for ARACIS is included in the legal provision (Art. 17.2 (i)), and in the pilot project under which the initial series of institutional evaluations have been undertaken. Although ARACIS publishes regular documentation, including annual reports, it has not yet produced overall comprehensive analytical reports concerning the quality of Romanian higher education. The first of these is planned to be completed in 2011, and ARACIS is currently exploring various options for improving its own capacity in this area.

New Structural Fund projects will also be focused in this area, including the creation of a "higher education barometer", based on the evaluation of 45 universities with ARACIS methodology, in addition to the 11 institutions HEI during the pilot project and a further five currently in the process of evaluation. About two-thirds of accredited HEIs will thus be part of this survey. Through PHARE, ARACIS will also conduct a transversal survey of several academic subjects, including law, IT, mechanical engineering, and sociology.

When considering that ARACIS was created in 2005, the agency's firm commitment to begin immediate steps towards system-wide analyses and the scrutiny of its own operations provides as much activity as can reasonably be expected at this stage.

Decision: substantially compliant.

3.2 Compliance with ESG Part 3: European standards for external quality assurance agencies

As with other external evaluations of quality assurance agencies across Europe regarding compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines, the panel looked for evidence to back up the statements made in the self-evaluation report and during the site visits. The current exercise is based on the principle of peer review and trust, and in an improvement-oriented perspective for all parties.

ESG 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education: The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

As discussed in the previous section, the external quality assurance processes used by ARACIS closely mirror the standards laid down in the ESG Part 2.

Opinion: substantially compliant (for details, see above).

> *ESG 3.2 Official status: Agencies should be formally recognized by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.*

ARACIS was created through Government Ordinance in 2005, which was modified and completed by primary legislation in 2006. The legal framework was extended by the ratification, through secondary legislation in 2005 and 2006, of the ARACIS internal rules and regulations, as well as the external evaluation methodology, the standards, reference standards and performance indicators.

In the opinion of the external panel, this situation represents an over-regulation through legislation and other parliamentary decisions, making rapid further development of the methodology and indicators somewhat complicated and lengthy.

Opinion: fully compliant.

> *ESG 3.3 Activities: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institution or programme level) on a regular basis.*

As previously noted, the maximum cycle for the external quality assurance of institutions is five years, while the requests for provisional authorisation and for accreditation are carried out when requested.

In 2007, 11 universities were evaluated on a volunteer basis as part of a pilot phase, in which the revised ARACIS methodology was tested.

Opinion: fully compliant.

> *ESG 3.4 Resources: Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organize and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.*

In terms of human resources, ARACIS relies on an administrative/technical staff structure (35 positions), the ARACIS Council (15 persons), and external evaluators, both Romanian and foreign (currently approximately 1,300 persons on register).

As already discussed, in the opinion of the EUA panel, the ARACIS administrative/technical staff should be encouraged through professional development and suitable human resource policies to develop expert competences in relevant key areas. ARACIS needs core professional in-house staff who can take on a stronger substantial role in the work of the agency, for example in developing papers on quality assurance issues, to assist with drafting reports, to undertake systems analysis, to promote good communication and dissemination, etc. The panel has also noted the need, already being addressed, for enhanced training and support for ARACIS's extensive network of external evaluators.

In terms of financial resources, ARACIS relies on fee income from client institutions, on contracts with the Ministry for specific additional activities, and on successfully competing for funding through mechanisms such as the European Structural Funds. In this way ARACIS could be considered to be fully self-financing.

Opinion: substantially compliant.

> *ESG 3.5 Mission statement: Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.*

The ARACIS mission statement is published in both electronic and hard copy versions, and contains clear goals and objectives.

However, in the opinion of the external panel, the use of this mission statement appears to be implicit, and not heralded or flagged very much. Likewise, the underlying philosophy and principles of the mission statement do not appear to be extensively published and communicated.

The mission statement should be used as an operational instrument in achieving ARACIS's goals and objectives. However, the extensive and detailed nature of the Romanian legislation means that the mission statement becomes less relevant, since all important things are already included in the Law.

In recognition of this situation, and in response to the monitoring report on the pilot phase, ARACIS has already moved to define a policy matrix with clearly stated goals and actions for the period 2008-2011.

Opinion: fully compliant.

> *ESG 3.6 Independence: Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.*

Article 16 of the 2005 Law states that ARACIS is an autonomous public institution of national interest. Decisions are made according to clear procedures, with the right to appeal. The EUA panel was informed by all parties that there is no external interference or involvement in the way ARACIS reaches its decisions. ARACIS enjoys under its statute a high degree of operational freedom and, as discussed, is independent in terms of its resources.

The Ministry is entitled to request a specific ARACIS evaluation of an institution in a specific situation, and this has already occurred. Such a request is on a purely contractual basis, under the same conditions as other ARACIS external evaluations. The Ministry does not influence the findings of operations carried out in evaluations requested in this way.

The accreditation of degrees is formally proposed by the Council of ARACIS to the Ministry. The Ministry receives the ARACIS proposals and prepares a list of degrees to be submitted to Parliament for accreditation by Law. There is no precedent for the Ministry modifying or not accepting an ARACIS proposal; even if there were, it would have no impact upon the independence of the operations and decisions of ARACIS as such.

Membership of the ARACIS Council (15 seats) is obtained through a competitive process, on the basis of open applications from interested individual academics, with vacancies every

three years. University rectors and elected national public representatives are not allowed to be candidates. The competition is moderated by an *ad hoc* nomination committee proposed jointly by the Academy of Science and the National Council of Rectors, and also contains existing Council members who are not stepping down at the end of the term.

The legal requirement that candidates for the Council be an academic staff member from a higher education institution effectively prevents the participation of external stakeholders and other interested parties (including students) in the Council. This could be considered a long-term weakness of the current structure.

Opinion: fully compliant.

> *ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies: The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:*
> - *a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;*
> - *an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;*
> - *publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes; a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.*

ARACIS uses such processes, which are defined and published. They include a self-assessment procedure, an external assessment process including a student member and site visits, and the publication of a report with decisions and recommendations.

Follow-up procedures are stipulated in the ARACIS guidelines, however these have only been used once so far. It is necessary to strengthen these through further elaboration.

As discussed previously, the role of the student in the ARACIS methodology should be enhanced.

Opinion: substantially compliant.

> *ESG 3.8 Accountability procedures: Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.*

The external panel found that a number of accountability initiatives have been taken, and would like to congratulate ARACIS on these, considering the relatively short period of existence of the agency so far.

The ARACIS quality assurance policy has been published, and there is a legal provision (Art. 17, 21) for a mandatory external review of ARACIS on a regular basis. Apart from the current exercise, ARACIS has already undergone an external independent evaluation in 2007, following its pilot phase of institutional quality assurance.

ARACIS has a fully defined Code of Ethics, with structures and mechanisms for the application of the code, and a Code of Confidentiality. These codes have been tried and tested already.

ARACIS likewise has an appeals process in place, adjudicated by the ARACIS executive board, which has also been tried and tested.

ARACIS also undergoes an annual external financial control by independent auditors.

ARACIS is developing a culture of obtaining feedback from partners and stakeholders. There is however a need to ensure that this feedback is systematically gathered, for example from ARACIS staff and experts, foreign experts and students, evaluated programmes and institutions. In particular, feedback from evaluators regarding the process, the suitability of forms, schedule, arrangements, etc., would all help improve quality. For the future development of ARACIS and ongoing quality assurance of the system, there is scope for greater feedback.

Opinion: substantially compliant.

Summary opinion:
Based on the evidence above, in the opinion of the external evaluation panel, ARACIS is substantially compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines.

4. Future challenges and recommendations

The entire Romanian higher education system is going through a substantial reform process, involving academic, administrative, financial, structural and cultural change. The concept of quality is central to this overall reform, at both institutional and system levels, as both an overarching objective *per se* and as a mechanism to achieve improvement in each field of reform.

Hence, also, the crucial role of ARACIS in underpinning and supporting the further development of the Romanian higher education system. The purpose of these recommendations is to draw attention to the main issues the panel considers need to be addressed by ARACIS if it is to play this key role in the system.

4.1 Towards a diversified higher education system

System differentiation is taking place in higher education systems across Europe and will also be a necessary part of the development of the Romanian higher education system. The development of quality assurance in Romania should therefore also be situated in the context of an increasingly diversified higher education system, with a differentiated view of overarching learning objectives.

This diversification and differentiation should apply equally to the concept of learning outcomes – with implications for levels, profiles and types of institutions. Quality assurance as a process should reflect this and deal with it, to ensure fitness for and of purpose.

The diversification of the higher education system implies diversification of individual university missions. This, in turn, will require greater clarity regarding the quality profiles needed behind these mission statements, such as improved transparency regarding societal

relevance and employability, an enhanced focus on individual development, developing research strength, the promotion of democratic citizenship, etc. As part of such developments, ARACIS might consider the development of a new category in its methodology to identify "excellence", rather than just "confidence", bearing in mind that excellence is always related to a specific institutional mission and purpose. Such diversification can, however, only be properly developed when all institutions, state and private, are evaluated, which is not the case at present. ARACIS needs to have the authority to ensure that all institutions are covered, and to define a strategy to achieve this.

4.2 Purposes and concepts of QA

There is currently a mismatch between ARACIS's stated objectives that underline the importance of quality improvement, and current activity, which tends to focus on checking that the required minimum standards are in place. As part of the positive momentum currently underway it will be necessary to ensure that all processes reflect the stated objectives and that the shift from inputs to outcomes is fully implemented.

The current ARACIS methodology is built around a standardised system, with clear reference points. In this context, a number of issues arise regarding the future concept and purpose of quality assurance and ARACIS's activity:
-    Is the role of consumer protection achieved through regulation, i.e. by removing players from the market based on poor quality; or through the improved supply of useful information, allowing informed consumers to makes their own decisions?
-    How should ARACIS engage with those private institutions which award publicly accredited degrees?
-    ARACIS currently focuses almost entirely on the quality of teaching and learning. The quality of research activity is however equally important not only in its own right but also in its overlap with teaching and learning (to a greater or lesser extent throughout all three Bologna degree cycles), and closer cooperation will be needed with other relevant agencies.

The panel encourages ARACIS to complete the current round of evaluation and/or accreditation for all universities and programmes, and then move to a new system based on quality improvement. This will include the need to train more evaluators from diverse national and European backgrounds. The evaluators to be used at institutional level will need greater levels of special training in different institutional aspects such as finance, management, research, European policies, etc. In addition, ARACIS will need to concentrate strongly on institutions' internal quality assurance processes with a specific focus on continuous quality improvement.

4.3 Programme or institutional approach to QA

Current ARACIS methodology maintains both a programme and institutional approach to quality assurance. While understandable as a first step in many countries shifting to the new Bologna study architecture, the experience elsewhere shows that this leads to excessively disruptive and very slow progress, low levels of manageability, and effectively reduces institutional responsibility and ownership of quality culture and improvement.

As increasing numbers of institutions complete a full external quality assurance exercise with ARACIS, ARACIS should explore the possibilities for moving to a greater emphasis on

institutional responsibility, such as exists in a number of European countries. Indeed, the EUA panel understands that such a move is currently also being prepared in Romania. In this way, the institutional approach should be seen as a broad concept embracing the institution's entire operations linked to programmes. For such an approach to work, it implies the need to ensure effective and robust governance systems inside institutions, and very effective internal quality assurance and improvement systems.

Once this main purpose has been established, other elements such as criteria, methodology, panels, reporting will then need to be elaborated.

As all Higher Education Institutions complete both the programme and institutional evaluations over the coming three years, ARACIS should also play an important role in moving Romanian higher education away from a centrally controlled national list of specialisations, and build on its institutional approach to quality assurance to encourage greater institutional responsibility for new and existing programmes.

4.4 Interaction with other bodies with a responsibility for quality

While ARACIS is the sole body authorised to accredit higher education institutions and programmes in Romania, the National Higher Education Research Council accredits and funds research centres in universities and other institutions. There is a need for close cooperation and coordination between these two bodies, particularly in the field of doctoral education.

ARACIS likewise needs to maintain open dialogue and policy coordination with the National Higher Education Funding Council, which awards up to 30% of core state financing (covering salaries and current expenditure) based on quality criteria. This funding mechanism is obviously a substantial driver of institutional behaviour and should ensure policy synergies with ARACIS objectives.

As part of recent societal changes in Romania, including accession to the European Union, the role of professional bodies will continue to increase in importance, at both technical and political levels. Many such bodies have a legitimate interest and role to play in ensuring and promoting the quality of education, including higher education, in their fields of relevance. Given the traditional limited dialogue between higher education institutions and such stakeholders, including employers, in Romania, and low levels of external input to the planning of curriculum, assessment and other academic matters, ARACIS should also act as a mechanism to ensure more structured and systematic dialogue and cooperation with professional bodies at national and institutional levels.

Given that accredited Romanian higher education institutions are permitted to apply for external quality assessment to ARACIS or any other agency – in Romania or elsewhere – included on EQAR, ARACIS should maintain an ongoing informal benchmarking process against such agencies to ensure it remains an attractive and competitive option for both Romanian and, in the future, foreign institutions. This benchmarking could cover areas such as quality-improvement benefits to institutions, the reputation and quality of its expert pool (including foreign and student experts), the quality of reports and follow-up services provided, as well as issues of price and other resource requirements.

4.5 Change management

Given the central role of the concept of quality to the overall reform process in Romanian higher education at both institutional and system levels, as both an overarching objective *per se* and as a mechanism to achieve improvement, ARACIS needs to see its own role as an agency within such a change management context.

It also needs to build on the outcomes of its pilot phase to integrate a long-term change management concept within its institutional evaluation methodology. This includes the evaluation of programmes in the broader institutional context and how they contribute to institutional quality improvement.

As the national body in this area, ARACIS can help steer this process not only through its accreditation and evaluation activity but also, and importantly, through the monitoring of change, and the publication of regular system-wide analyses. The forthcoming European Structural Fund projects will provide an ideal platform for developing this capacity within ARACIS, as a major service to Romanian higher education institutions, other national bodies, and major stakeholders, including the public.

This report has highlighted a number of substantive and procedural challenges linked to a quality philosophy and to ARACIS's current approach. In order to move towards addressing these challenges, ARACIS needs to concentrate on a small number of key issues at the heart of its current operations, looking at these in terms of the *de facto* situation, and in terms of the ideal situation, examining how these two situations match, what and where are the opportunities for advancement, and how and with whom these can be best achieved.

As part of the change management process, ARACIS should ensure regular input from key stakeholder groups, including their feedback on progress so far. Input and dialogue is especially required with the National Council of Rectors, national student organisations, and employer representatives.

ARACIS will have to ensure, in a transparent way, a clear *de jure* and reliable *de facto* separation of this role – which results from an important consultative and formative role to be played by ARACIS - from any accreditation or evaluation activities.

4.6 External communications

As part of the ongoing process of ensuring understanding and implementation of the broad reform process, it is vital that relevant and effective communications policies and tools are in place to reach all partners and stakeholders in the process, both internal and external. The ever-increasing importance of higher education for Romanian society, from all perspectives, requires improved understanding of the goals and objectives of the various elements of this reform, including progress in achieving these, by all partners and stakeholders. The importance of the quality of communications efforts can therefore not be understated.

For ARACIS's key client group, the higher education institutions themselves, it would be useful to extract key cross-cutting principles from the current guidelines, to facilitate discussion and to improve understanding and coherence across the various sections. Such

synthetic documentation will also be needed when discussing modifications to the current guidelines, following the pilot phase.

For the broader academic community, as well as interested members of the public, it would be useful for ARACIS to collate and present all relevant elements linked to quality assurance policies and practices, in a user-friendly format.

The use of precise terminology is crucial in many areas of quality assurance and accreditation. ARACIS needs to ensure that its work undertaken already in this area is better known and used among all partners and stakeholder groups.

5. Conclusions

The external panel would like to express its appreciation for the invitation to evaluate the performance of ARACIS so far in the many varied aspects of its work. This has been a challenging and fascinating task. The panel has witnessed a very positive momentum currently in the Romanian system, and the important role of ARACIS in assisting and facilitating this dynamic movement. Considerable expertise has already been built up within ARACIS and its extended network, and this report offers a number of suggestions as to how to develop and apply this expertise further. Romanian higher education needs to build on the achievements of ARACIS so far, to ensure its ongoing active integration into the emerging European Higher Education Area.

Brussels, 27 August 2008

Annex 1: ARACIS audit

Background and Guidelines

I. Background information

ARACIS was established in 2006 as the successor organisation of CNEAA (which had been established in 1993). A new law on quality assurance was adopted and the new agency was established with the understanding that it would build upon the work of CNEAA and improve operations.

Accordingly, ARACIS has developed a new QA methodology that takes into account recent European QA developments (specifically, the European Standards and Guidelines adopted in Bergen in 2005) and is currently piloting it. The EUA review will take place at the end of this piloting phase.

II. Aims and objectives

The main aim of the EUA is to provide professional support to ARACIS in the further development of its QA methodology and practice and prepare ARACIS in its application to become a full member of ENQA and actively participate in European wide projects.

The specific objectives are to assess:

- The quality assurance experience that had been accrued by CNEAA and the improvements brought about by ARACIS, through an examination of its new procedures and methodologies, their applications and the results

- The compliance of the agency with the Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area

III. Purposes and scope of the audit of ARACIS

To meet the strategic needs of the ARACIS at this stage of its development, the audit will have three distinct, but related purposes.

First, the audit will evaluate the effectiveness of the ARACIS's performance since its establishment having particular regard to the policies and procedures that ARACIS has developed and how they are being implemented and operated. In particular, it will evaluate how ARACIS is serving its stakeholders, primarily the university staff and students, in addition to external stakeholders such as employers and the general public.

Second, the audit will be developmental in intent and will aim to assist ARACIS in achieving its own quality enhancement goals and to further develop its own internal quality culture. In this connection, it will consider the organisational structures and processes of the ARACIS secretariat as it currently operates and evaluate its suitability in the context of ARACIS's developing role. Thus, it will focus on the mission of ARACIS and the norms and goals of the organisation. It is envisaged that the process will assist ARACIS in identifying any constraints or opportunities that arise for the organisation in meeting its aims and goals. The audit will do this by facilitating reflection on:

- The mission, aims and objectives of ARACIS and the systems and procedures in place and their suitability to fulfilling the mission

- The quality measures in use including feedback from stakeholders, both internal and external

- Strategic planning procedures and the capacity to change and meet new challenges

Third, the audit will have a particular focus on ARACIS' role as a quality assurance agency in the Romanian higher education against the backdrop of developments in the European Higher Education Area.

In order to address the various purposes of the audit in a thorough manner, the audit will be organised around three distinct stands:

- *Strand 1: Review of performance, organisation and structures of the secretariat and Board of ARACIS*

- As ARACIS develops, the need arises for an audit of the systems and structures that are in place. The audit will examine and evaluate the suitability of the organisational structures in place for the conduct of accreditations.

- *Strand 2: Review of the accreditation methodology and procedures*

- This strand will examine the accreditation methodology and procedures put in place since the establishment of ARACIS and the improvement brought to the previous CNEAA procedures. It will evaluate the extent to which these meet the mission and goals of the organisation and how these accreditation exercises are perceived by the higher education sector, the students, the employers and the general public.

- *Strand 3: Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

- This strand of the audit will evaluate the extent to which ARACIS complies with the standards for external quality assurance agencies as set out in the recently adopted European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

- There are eight such standards which relate to:

  - The agency's use of the external quality assurance procedures for higher education as set out in the European Standards and Guidelines

  - The official status of the agency

  - The regularity of the agency's engagement in external quality assurance activities

  - The adequacy of the agency's human and financial resources

  - The clarity of the agency's goals as set out in a publicly available mission statement

  - The independence of the agency with regard to its decision-making processes and especially in relation to government and higher education institutions

  - The use of external quality assurance criteria and processes involving self-assessment by the review subject, external expert review, publication of review outcomes and follow-up process

  - The internal accountability procedures of the agency

  Although this strand of the audit will be the most discrete, it is anticipated that the findings from the other strands will make a contribution towards demonstrating the agency's compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines.

IV. Self-Evaluation Process

As mentioned above, an internal staff committee would oversee the self-evaluation process and produce the self-study report. The committee could organise a number of self-evaluation exercises. These may include staff and stakeholder surveys, focus groups and SWOT analyses.

V. Self-evaluation report

It is proposed that the self-evaluation report cover the following headings (the proposed number of pages for each section is indicative):

Approach to the external review (2 pages)

1.1. The decision to undertake this review: How was it decided? Why an evaluation at this time? What are the expectations?

1.2. The self-evaluation process: How it was organised? Who was involved? Was the draft self-evaluation report discussed, with whom, with what effect?

The Romanian higher education landscape (2 pages)

> *Legislative framework of the higher education system*

> *Number and type of institutions and type of degrees offered*

> *Key figures: enrolment in different types of institutions; enrolment trends over the past 5 years*

> *A brief historical account of quality assurance in Romania: e.g., former system of external quality assurance in Romania and the current situation; the state of development of internal quality processes in institutions; an analysis of the added-value of ARACIS as compared to the previous situation*

ARACIS mission and organisational structure (10 pages)

> *The legislative framework that established ARACIS*

> *Tasks and official status*

> *Mission and strategic policy*

> *Staffing and staff management (including an analysis of strengths and weaknesses)*

> *Funding of the agency*

> *Corporate structure: Decision-making bodies and processes (including links with stakeholders), with an analysis of strengths and weaknesses*

Activities conducted by the Agency (10 pages)

> *Number and types of accreditation conducted to date*

> *Description and analysis of all phases of the quality assurance processes that have been put in place: e.g., links with the institutions being evaluated, self-evaluation reports, appointment and training of panels, visits, evaluation reports, etc.*

> *Description and analysis of how ARACIS ensure consistency in decision-making, with an analysis of strengths and weaknesses*

> *System of ARACIS internal quality assurance, with an analysis of strengths and weaknesses*

> *Description and analysis of the appeals procedures, with an analysis of strengths and weaknesses*

> *National and international participation, with an analysis of strengths and weaknesses*

Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHA – Compliance statements (4 pages)

6. Conclusions and recommendations (2 pages)

7. Optional annexes (e.g., abbreviations of main Romanian bodies)

VI. Expert panel

The EUA will appoint a panel of three members and a secretary. The choice of panel members will take into consideration national origins and professional experience in order to achieve an appropriate mix of expertise and backgrounds. The panel will include: three European senior higher education leaders, one of whom will chair the panel, and a secretary. All will have extensive evaluation experience and knowledge of the European Standards and Guidelines.

The panel will:

- Conduct two site visits in order to interview (in groups or individually) the different constituencies (Each visit will last three days).

- Write a report under the supervision of the panel chair, which will include recommendations regarding all the objectives set for the review (cf. 2 above)

- Attend an internal meeting to discuss the draft report (1 day)
- Attend a meeting in May 2008 to present orally the draft report (1 day)
- Finalise the report by June 2008

VII. Practical aspects

ARACIS will appoint one person to organise the site visits and to ensure the liaison with EUA.

VIII. Schedule

Self-evaluation by ARACIS	October – December 2007
First site visit	January/February 2008
Second site visit	March/April 2008
Internal meeting to finalise oral report	May 2008
Meeting in Bucharest to present the oral report	May 2008
Final report	June 2008