

FOLLOW-UP REPORT

THE ROMANIAN AGENCY FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Introduction

According to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), “Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG”. The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) had three external reviews in 2009, 2013 and 2018.

As part of the external review process, by September 30, 2020 (within two years of the Board’s positive decision on membership) ARACIS is requested to submit the Follow-up Report. Also, ARACIS opted to have a voluntary progress visit by two experts; this visit will take place in October 2020.

An overview of ARACIS compliance with the ESG’s standards and of the recommendations formulated by ENQA panel and Board is presented in the table below:

Standard and Judgement	Recommendations
ESG 2.1 Substantially compliant	ARACIS should cease to treat ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘competences’ as synonymous in its evaluation methods; ARACIS should develop a manual to disseminate the concept of learning outcomes to its evaluators and to higher education institutions in Romania.
ESG 2.2 Substantially compliant	ARACIS should continue to take steps within its existing methodology to bring its practice into closer alignment with the focus in ESG 2015 on student-centeredness, learning outcomes and enhancement. ARACIS should undertake an analysis of the costs and the level of workload to higher education institutions and other interested parties of the current Romanian higher education quality assurance system.
ESG 2.3 Fully compliant	-
ESG 2.4 Fully compliant	-
ESG 2.5 Fully compliant	-



Standard and Judgement	Recommendations
ESG 2.6 Partially compliant	<p>For its new evaluation methodology ARACIS should broaden its view of the intended readership of its reports at programme and institutional levels to embrace potential students, those who advise them, and employers of Romanian graduates, and provide reports that are more accessible to a wider readership.</p> <p>As it develops its new information systems under the QAFIN Project, ARACIS should ensure that they deliver improved performance, storage, organisation and presentation of data, including via the new ARACIS website, and that all its reports can be indexed by internet search engines.</p>
ESG 2.7 Fully compliant	-
ESG 3.1 Partially compliant	<p>The panel recommends that the respective responsibilities of the Council, the President, the Executive Board, the Chief Executive Officer and the Secretary General should be more clearly drawn in the interests of transparency, accountability and good governance.</p> <p>The panel recommends the creation of a strategic plan setting aims for the Agency's own development with targets against which ARACIS can measure its progress and as a means of informing the Ministry of National Education, higher education institutions and all those who work with ARACIS of its priorities and expectations. The panel suggest to ENQA that after one year it asks to see a draft strategic plan from ARACIS for the next 5 years.</p> <p>To work on the shift from quality assurance as compliance to quality assurance for enhancement, ARACIS should seek the support of the Ministry for a partnership project led by ARACIS with the Ministry and the HEIs to give substance to what is at present an aspiration.</p> <p>The panel recommends that ARACIS should either implement the 2013 recommendation, for a stakeholders' committee and embrace a more generous definition of stakeholder, or that it substantially increases the number of stakeholder representatives on its Council.</p>
ESG 3.2 Fully compliant	- - -
ESG 3.3 Fully compliant	-
ESG 3.4 Fully compliant	<p>The Board calls for ARACIS to continue with the good practice of regular publishing of reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities, such as the annual synthetic reports on the quality and quality assurance in Romanian higher education.</p>
ESG 3.5 Substantially	<p>The panel urges ARACIS to discuss the present fees regime with HEIs and the Ministry with a view to ensuring that the level of fees it charges for its</p>



Standard and Judgement	Recommendations
compliant	evaluations takes into account its operational costs more realistically and explores other ways to secure funding for its office services including information technology.
ESG 3.6 Fully compliant	ARACIS should provide searchable digital copies of evaluation reports to the members of its Permanent Specialty Commissions and other committees in advance of meetings where such reports are discussed.
ESG 3.7 Fully compliant	-

2. Progress in implementation of recommendations

In this section we present the 2018 ENQA recommendations and describe the actions made by ARACIS so far and those planned for the future:

➤ ESG 2.1. CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

ARACIS should cease to treat 'learning outcomes' and 'competences' as synonymous in its evaluation methods.

In the current ***Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference and the list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*** approved by Government Decision no. 915/2017 (published in the Romanian Official Gazette no. 25/ 11.01.2018), https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Methodology_2018_EN1.pdf there are several indicators dealing with the learning outcomes. Moreover, correspondence between requirements of the qualifications and expected learning outcomes is an element of the performance indicator PI.C.2.1.2 (*Correspondence between diplomas and qualifications*), and the achieved learning outcomes are included in the performance indicators PI.C.3.1.1 (*The HEI has regulations for student examination and grading which are rigorously and consistently applied.*) and PI.C.3.1.2. (*Integration of evaluation in the teaching and learning plan (curriculum), by courses and study programs*).

As per the Order of the Minister of Education (MO) no. 3475/2017, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/197711>, Art. 1.3, for all study programs to be proposed for **provisional authorizing/accreditation**, registration of the qualification in the National Qualifications Register for Higher Education (RNCIS) is obligatory. At Art. 1.5, it is stated that study programs should assure conformity between acquired competences in higher education and learning outcomes corresponding to competences which are specific to existing occupations from the Classification of Occupations in Romania (COR) or to the International Standard Classification of Occupations ISCO-08.



The same MO, at Art. 1.6, establishes that the National Authority for Qualifications (Autoritatea Nationala pentru Calificari - ANC) holds a permanent dialogue with all institutions involved in the national system of qualifications and consults all empowered institutions on the design of the university curricula based on professional competences required by the labour market.

Each qualification from the RNCIS is defined in terms of learning outcomes, corresponding to qualification levels in higher education 6, 7 and 8, as per the National Qualifications framework (Cadrul National al Calificarilor – CNC) as per MO no. 3475/2017, Art. 1.7. *As of the 1st of January 2021*, when registering a qualification, all study programs descriptions, for new or revised programs, in order to be registered in the RNCIS, will have to describe the correlation between the intended learning outcomes and the competences required by the labour market.

In the proposal for **a new Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference and the list of performance indicators of ARACIS** (https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Nov_2019_Output-3.1_draft_External_Evaluation_Methodology__Revised_final_English1.pdf), developed in the framework of “Improving public policies in higher education and enhancing the quality of regulations by updating quality standards” – QAFIN project <https://www.aracis.ro/en/qafin-project/>, which benefits of technical assistance from the World Bank experts, **the learning outcomes and competences** are also distinctly addressed.

Quotes from the draft new Evaluation Methodology (abbreviations in Romanian below: S – Standard; IP – Performance Indicator):

Domain B. Educational Effectiveness

Criterion B.1 Content of study programs

S.B.1.2. Structure and coherence of study programs/specialisations

IP.B.1.2.9. Study programs are designed as to enable graduates to benefit of learning outcomes as much as possible, including interdisciplinary knowledge.

IP.B.1.2.14 The HEI/organisation is regularly monitoring and evaluating the content of the study programme and its achieved learning outcomes and their impact on the learning process.

IP.B.2.1.11 The learning outcomes are permanently monitored and documented.

S.B.1.3 Capacity to deliver study programs efficiently, with adequate human resource and learning environment

IP.B.1.3.4 The syllabi clearly present the specific and general expected competences to be acquired to assure correlation of the university study programme with the National Qualifications Framework as per the National Qualifications Register for Higher Education (RNCIS).

S.B.1.4. Relevance of university study programs

IP.B.1.4.2. Ref.2¹: The expected learning outcomes of the study programs are correlated with the socio-economic perspectives at regional, national or international levels.

¹ *Enhancement is addressed by Reference performance indicators (Ref.). The Reference standard is a description of the requirements which define an optimal level of achievement of an activity by the education provider/unit/institution providing education, on the basis of*



IP.B.1.2.6. Ref.1. The structure of study programs takes into account the diversity of student population, the educational expectations of the student, is flexible to allow each student to select his/her own educational path, according to his/her possibilities and interest, without affecting the objectives of the programme and the expected **learning outcomes**.

In addition to the traditional aspects of quality assurance in higher education, the new methodology introduces new aspects such as the social dimension in quality assurance and the use of learning outcomes in order to make study programmes and their course units or modules student centred/output oriented. The newly developed methodology was subject to public consultation in five workshops in the main university centres, with the participation of a large number of different stakeholders.

The approval of the new Methodology by the by the Romanian Government is expected in 2021.

Once the new methodology will be approved, further training programs will be organized with the evaluators, an important part being dedicated to the learning outcomes.

ARACIS should develop a manual to disseminate the concept of learning outcomes to its evaluators and to higher education institutions in Romania.

According to the National Education Law no. 1 / 2011 (https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Law-of-National-Education-no-1_2011_translated-August-2017.pdf), art. 345 alin. (3), ANC, together with the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER) are responsible with the development of a methodology concerning the identification, evaluation and recognition of learning outcomes. The MO 3475/2017, at art. 1.13., states that ANC is developing instructions related to the description of learning outcomes by the higher education institutions. These Guidelines, in Romanian, are available here: http://www.anc.edu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Ghid_Metodologic_privind_scrierea_rezultatelor_invatari.pdf.

A new version of this manual is currently under development by ANC, to be ready in 2021, and ARACIS will participate as an important stakeholder in the process. Examples of learning outcomes description will also be developed, for a certain number of study programs. ARACIS will use these Guidelines in the trainings organized with the evaluators, during 2021 and 2022.

➤ **ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE**

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

ARACIS should continue to take steps within its existing methodology to bring its practice into closer alignment with the focus in ESG 2015 on student-centeredness, learning outcomes and enhancement.

existing good practice at national, European or world level. The Reference standards are specific for each study program or institution, they are optional and superior to the minimum level.



In the current ARACIS Methodology, https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Methodology_2018_EN1.pdf, student-centeredness is a key element.

Quotes from current Methodology (abbreviations below: S – Standard; PI – Performance Indicator):

The most relevant performance indicators are:

PI.A.2.1.3. Adequate financial resources for teaching and learning activities, adequate support services that are easily accessible to students;

PI B2.1.4 Student-centered learning methods;

PI.C.3.1.2. Evaluation as part of developing learning and teaching processes, at course and study programme level

PI C.5.1.2 Teaching as a learning resource.

In the draft new Methodology, developed in the framework of QAFIN project, student-centeredness is addressed by new standards and performance indicators.

Quotes from the draft new Methodology (abbreviations: S – Standard; PI – Performance Indicator):

Criterion B2. Learning Outcomes

S.B.2.1. Student-centered methods of teaching, learning and assessment (in RO: evaluation)

PI.B.2.1.1. Student-centered methods of teaching, learning and assessment is the responsibility of Higher education institution/organisation and of each academic, by adequate design of teaching methods and learning environment. The learning outcomes are explained and discussed with the students in the perspective of their relevance for the professional and personal development.

Enhancement is addressed by Reference performance indicators, as explained before. Moreover, the evaluation fiches for study programs and institutional evaluation were recently revised, so that it become mandatory to include recommendations not only at the end of the fiche – more general ones, but also for each indicator, where necessary. The new fiches can be consulted here (in Romanian): <http://www.aracis.ro/documente-de-vizita/>; <https://www.aracis.ro/documente-de-vizita-evaluare-licenta/> . That is leading to a more enhancement oriented process, and not focused on pointing out eventual deficiencies. The recommendations will also be used in order to organize efficient follow-up evaluation activities.

ARACIS should undertake an analysis of the costs and the level of workload to higher education institutions and other interested parties of the current Romanian higher education quality assurance system.

The following measures were already taken, in order to reduce the workload of higher education institutions and to simplify and clarify the external evaluation procedures:

- Simplification of evaluation fiches and annexes for the evaluation of study programmes and at institutional level;



- The newly developed Evaluation Guidelines for doctoral studies (in Romanian: <https://www.aracis.ro/proceduri-3/>) allows the evaluation of all doctoral schools within a higher education institution, at a time, thus simplifying the procedures.

In the development of the new methodology and guidelines the principle of simplification will also be considered. The development and use of the new IT platform will also assist panel members, as well as higher education institutions in clarifying the process, reduce the paper load and increase transparency.

Further simplifications, as for example reduce the necessary level and type of evaluations, can be performed only by law level amendments, that can be realized by the Parliament. ARACIS will reflect in that sense, and following consultations with the stakeholders will propose such modifications. One of the measures that are being considered is moving to an audit type evaluation at institutional level.

➤ ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

For its new evaluation methodology ARACIS should broaden its view of the intended readership of its reports at programme and institutional levels to embrace potential students, those who advise them, and employers of Romanian graduates, and provide reports that are more accessible to a wider readership.

As it develops its new information systems under the QAFIN Project, ARACIS should ensure that they deliver improved performance, storage, organisation and presentation of data, including via the new ARACIS website, and that all its reports can be indexed by internet search engines.

In the process of further consultations regarding the new Methodology and Guidelines, stakeholders will be asked on what would they expect from external quality assurance reports, so that it answers to their needs for information. All reports are currently searchable.

To support higher education Institutions in developing the self-assessment report for Bachelor study programs, ARACIS has developed a detailed guide structured according to the standards and quality criteria, including recommendations for the evidences that could support each criterion, available here in Romanian:

<https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2019-Ghid-i%CC%82ntocmire-Raport-evaluare-interna-licenta-07.10.2019.pdf> .

Based on this guide, within the frame of QAFIN project, ARACIS is currently developing an IT platform that ensures, on one hand, online interaction between the evaluation panel and the assessed university, and on the other hand, facilitates the development of site visit documents, like for example the evaluation reports. The reports will be directly up-loaded on the ARACIS website and in the DEQAR database. Interim and final reports will be automatically generated in an appropriate format that allows automatic keyword searching. At this moment, ARACIS is in the piloting phase of the facilities offered by the IT platform.



➤ ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

The panel recommends that the respective responsibilities of the Council, the President, the Executive Board, the Chief Executive Officer and the Secretary General should be more clearly drawn in the interests of transparency, accountability and good governance.

The responsibilities of the Council members and of the Executive Board, respectively of the Chief executive Officer, are established in the EMERGENCY ORDINANCE no. 75 of July 12, 2005 on the education quality assurance http://arhiva.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Legislatie - Proceduri/2017/oug_75-2005-quality_assurance_ARACIS.pdf, and in the ARACIS Functioning Regulations (ROF) available here (in Romanian): <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ROF-ARACIS-APRILIE-2020.pdf>.

Thus, at chapter IV establishes the attribution of the Council, the Executive Body, the Secretary General, as member of the Executive Body, and of the Departments organized within the Council. Chapter V establishes the attributions of the president, vice-president, secretary general, departments directors. Finally, at chapter VII the attributions of the General Director (Chief executive Office) are defined.

The ROF is currently being revised, with technical assistance from the World Bank, within QAFIN project. The new version will be in force by end 2020. For developing the new version of the ROF, stakeholders were consulted.

The panel recommends the creation of a strategic plan setting aims for the Agency's own development with targets against which ARACIS can measure its progress and as a means of informing the Ministry of National Education, higher education institutions and all those who work with ARACIS of its priorities and expectations. The panel suggests to ENQA that after one year it asks to see a draft strategic plan from ARACIS for the next 5 years.

The **Strategy of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education for the period 2018–2021** is published on website [https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Strategia_ARACIS_pentru_2018-2021 - Final 28.01.20191.pdf](https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Strategia_ARACIS_pentru_2018-2021_-_Final_28.01.20191.pdf)

As the composition of the Council shall be renewed in 2021, ARACIS considered that strategic planning for the additional 2 years would be the responsibility of the next, renewed, Council.

The **Operational Plan for 2019** translates ARACIS's strategic plan for 2018-2021 into short-term actions for 2019 and continues some activities started in 2018. The Operational Plan was drawn considering the available ARACIS's human and financial resources. The activities are closely linked to the Agency's budget and to the strategic projects in which ARACIS participates as a coordinator or partner (e.g. university classification and study program ranking, doctoral assessment, equal opportunities or greater involvement of stakeholders in



quality assurance processes). ARACIS will start developing an operational plan for 2021, as soon as the conditions in which the new academic year starts are clear.

To work on the shift from quality assurance as compliance to quality assurance for enhancement, ARACIS should seek the support of the Ministry for a partnership project led by ARACIS with the Ministry and the HEIs to give substance to what is at present an aspiration.

At national level no appropriate funding opportunities are open. ARACIS will apply within ERAMSUS + calls, when available, and upon completion of the current projects.

The panel recommends that ARACIS should either implement the 2013 recommendation, for a stakeholders' committee and embrace a more generous definition of stakeholder, or that it substantially increases the number of stakeholder representatives on its Council.

Participation of ARACIS as partner in the project Effective involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance activities (ESQA - 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3-BOLOGNA, www.esqa.ro), coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Research of Romania, aims to lay out the basis of an extended and more effective engagement of stakeholders in external quality assurance activities. ARACIS has organized a peer-review activity between 30.10 - 01.11.2019 in Bucharest, that included an interactive session with the participation of stakeholders, and contributed to the one organized in December 2019 by the Danish Accreditation Institution in Copenhagen. ARACIS elaborated a self-diagnosis report, the main conclusions being included in the *Study related to stakeholders' involvement in external quality assurance activities (Milja Homan, Jakub Grodecki, Vaidotas Viliūnas)* available here: https://esqa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Study-on-stakeholder-involvement-in-EQA_web_n.pdf.

Based on the *Guide for effective stakeholders' involvement in QA*, which is currently under development within the project (in draft available here: <https://esqa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Draft-ESQA-Guide-for-for-effective-stakeholders-involvement-in-QA-for-consultation.pdf>), ARACIS will develop a plan for increased and more efficient involvement of stakeholders in the external quality assurance activities, to be ready in Spring 2020.

➤ **ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis**

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

The Board calls for ARACIS to continue with the good practice of regular publishing of reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities, such as the annual synthetic reports on the quality and quality assurance in Romanian higher education.

ARACIS continues to publish annual reports, both in Romanian and English <https://www.aracis.ro/rapoarte-interne-aracis/>, <https://www.aracis.ro/en/aracis-activity->



reports/. At the same time, ARACIS Council plans to develop a strategic approach to the selection of topics for thematic analysis.

One of the important topics addressed in the QAFIN project was the development of a guide on internal quality assurance system at HEI level, to consolidate the quality culture, as part of the university's own mission and vision and reflected in its governance strategy.

The Internal quality assurance (IQA) Guidelines, developed with technical assistance from the World Bank experts, will be presented and debated, during November 2020, in four sessions, organized in different university centers. On this occasion, on the basis of a questionnaire, ARACIS will analyse the state of development of the internal quality assurance in HEI at national level and will promote a "national benchmark" for IQA management.

https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/WB_IQA_Guidelines_25.10.20191-1.pdf

One of the major activities in the QAFIN project was the development of a university classification methodology and the ranking of study programs. The methodology was developed in collaboration with World Bank and in consultation with all universities. In order to establish the classification of universities and the ranking of study programs, the collection of a large number of data regarding the universities and their study programs is required, data that will be grouped on six dimensions (teaching/learning, research, internationalization, social engagement, Knowledge transfer and student satisfaction). For data collection and processing, an IT platform has been developed, that will automatically generate the classification of universities into three categories and will rank the study programs by fields of undergraduate study.

Having a database that will collect information from universities and the Ministry of Education and Research in an easy to process format, ARACIS will be able to periodically perform thematic analyses on different criteria. At present, the activity is in the approval phase of a Government Decision in order to be able to start data collection and perform the classification and the ranking. The methodology used is available here:

(https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Output_2.1Classification_Second_Draft_April_20181.pdf) .

ARACIS is also considering, in correlation with the recommendations provided during the ENQA external evaluation process, to realize a thematic analysis on the way the higher education institutions are correlating the intended learning outcomes with the requirements of employers, especially for engineering programs.

➤ ESG 3.5 Resources

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

The panel urges ARACIS to discuss the present fees regime with HEIs and the ministry with a view to ensuring that the level of fees it charges for its evaluations takes into account its operational costs more realistically and explore other ways to secure funding for its office services including information technology.



The fee for different evaluation activities performed by ARACIS are established through Government Decision 1731 from 6 December 2006 for the approval of authorization and accreditation fees for ARACIS external evaluation activities. The government decision is establishing a correlation between the evaluation fees and the level of professor fee, as per the legislation in force. Consequently, ARACIS can periodically increase the fees, if increases of professors fees are established by the legislation.

The last increase of fees was realised starting 01.12.2019, the current fees being available here: <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Tarife-ARACIS-aplicabile-de-la-01.12.2019.pdf> .

No further increase is foreseen in 2020, for two reasons:

- ARACIS disposes of sufficient financial reserves;
- The higher education institutions are already facing financial difficulties related to the pandemic.

➤ **ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct**

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

ARACIS should provide searchable digital copies of evaluation reports to the members of its Permanent Speciality Commissions and other committees in advance of meetings where such reports are discussed.

Searchable digital copies of evaluation reports are available in ARACIS cloud (<https://cloudaracis.rms-it.ro/index.php/login>) as soon as they are ready, so members of the Permanent Speciality Commissions and of ARACIS Council can consult them at any time, before the meetings.

3. New developments

Based on the Order of the Minister of Education and Research no. 3.200 of February 7, 2020, the Methodology for evaluation of doctoral studies and the systems of criteria, standards and performance indicators used in the evaluation was approved, (available here in Romanian - <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/OM-3200-din-7-Feb.-2020-Metodologie-studii-doctorale-forma-sintetica.pdf>). International experts will be used for all types of evaluation dealing with doctoral studies.

The Methodology consists of a system of criteria, standards and performance indicators used in the accreditation and periodic evaluation processes in the fields of doctoral studies, doctoral schools and institutions organizing doctoral studies.

ARACIS developed its own procedures for conducting the process of periodic external evaluation every 5 years. Because of the pandemic situation, the evaluations haven't started yet.