



*Approved in the ARACIS Council meeting of 24 September 2020*

## **Guidelines on conducting external institutional evaluation in a blended format**

**Scope :** accreditation and periodical evaluation procedures for higher education institutions during the state of emergency, state of alert, and until the line authorities lift the restrictions on public meetings.

The activities, stages and methodology for the accreditation and periodical evaluation procedures at the level of the institutional structures for each individual higher education study programme / domain are as described in the Government's Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on quality assurance in education, approved by Law no. 87/2006, as subsequently amended and supplemented; Decision no. 915 of 14 December 2017 on the Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference, and list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Guidelines of activities for quality evaluation in higher education study programmes and higher education institutions, developed by ARACIS.

The external evaluation for the institutional accreditation or periodical evaluation shall be prepared and conducted in compliance with the provisions of the Guidelines of activities for quality evaluation in higher education study programmes and higher education institutions, Part II and III - External evaluation for institutional accreditation, respectively External evaluation of academic quality in accredited higher education institutions, as subsequently amended and supplemented.

Within the epidemiological context created by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, the evaluation procedures for institutions can also be conducted in a blended format; this manner of working entails a preliminary review of the internal evaluation documents; identifying the aspects that will be tackled during the visit at the requesting institution to check compliance with standards, and remote collaboration via synchronous visual communication means to organise the meetings of the members of the expert evaluators commissions, the meetings with various stakeholders and any online visits to any units where access is restricted or difficult during the visit, as well as finalisation of the external evaluation documents using synchronous or asynchronous communication means.

### **METHODOLOGICAL STAGES**

#### **A. Preliminary stage**

1. The ARACIS External Quality Evaluation Department takes note of the External evaluation request filed by the university with the Agency, and of the compliance with the contract terms for the institutional evaluation and the evaluation of at least 20% of the bachelor's and master's study programmes.



2. The head of the External Quality Evaluation Department and the rector of the requesting institution jointly agree on the higher education study programmes that will be evaluated during the institutional evaluation process, and sign a protocol, using the asynchronous online working procedures.
3. Upon the proposal of the External Quality Evaluation Department, the Agency's Council approves the list of higher education study programmes that will be evaluated and appoints the Head of the mission, the Technical Secretary, and the membership of the expert evaluators commission.
4. The Evaluation Contract can be concluded, the evaluation fee can be paid, and the Internal Evaluation Report for the institution and for the higher education study programmes selected for external evaluation, as well as its pertaining annexes can be received using the asynchronous online working procedures. To this purpose, the technical secretary of the commission shall keep in touch with the contact person appointed by the requesting higher education institution.
5. Using synchronous and asynchronous remote communication means, the Head of the mission and the rector of the requesting institution establish the schedule of the institutional evaluation and evaluation of the selected higher education study programmes.

Depending on the size and complexity of the evaluated institution, and considering that the evaluation is conducted in a blended format, using a combination of synchronous/asynchronous online activities and face-to-face activities, the duration of the external evaluation mission may be extended to last for 5-7 days. The Head of the mission shall decide on extending the duration of the external evaluation mission, in agreement with the rector of the evaluated institution.

6. The technical secretary of the evaluation commission informs the higher education institution in writing about the Agency's intention to conduct the evaluation in a blended format, and requests the institution's consent.

### **B. Arranging the evaluation process**

7. After receiving the written agreement of the higher education institution, the head of the mission and the coordinator of the expert evaluators commission for the institutional evaluation get in touch with the contact person appointed by the requesting higher education institution and agree together on the details for the operationalisation of all the required stages for conducting the evaluation remotely, via synchronous visual communication means and face-to-face verification visits. For all the meetings that will take place at the requesting higher education institution, the institution undertakes to organise these while complying with all social distancing and hygiene measures in force (including by providing masks and disinfectants for the participants).
8. After remote consultation with the members of the expert evaluators commission, the commission coordinator and the person in charge with the evaluation, appointed by the requesting higher education institution shall establish a schedule of the stages of the evaluation, per days and hours, including face-to-face visits at the institution, as well as interviews with various stakeholders, which will be conducted remotely using synchronous visual communication



means. The schedule of the evaluation shall be enclosed to the Visit Sheet concerning the institution evaluation and referred to in the Report of the institutional evaluation commission for managerial and financial activities.

9. To ensure compliance with the prevention measures against SARS-CoV-2 in the education institutions, the period of the face-to-face visits pertaining to the higher education study programmes may be different from the period of the institutional visit. Thus, the study programme evaluation activity of the expert evaluators may be independent from the activity of the institutional evaluation commission, within the 5 to 7-day evaluation period established.

10. The higher education institution shall set up a virtual workspace, further on referred to as a virtual classroom, which shall be accessible to the members of the external evaluation commission appointed by the ARACIS Council and the staff appointed by the university, based on usernames and passwords. All the documents of the internal evaluation file and the pertaining annexes shall be uploaded to this virtual classroom, and the links to other additional resources needed by the commission to complete the evaluation (e.g. topics for the ongoing evaluation, projects, bachelor papers/dissertations etc.) and the links pertaining to the remote interviews organised using synchronous visual communication means shall be posted in the virtual classroom. The classroom shall be structured so as to separate the documentation related to the institutional evaluation from the documentation pertaining to each of the higher education study programmes selected for evaluation. All the members of the external evaluation commission shall have access to all the documentation uploaded to the virtual classroom.

11. If the evaluated institution does not have the technical possibility to set up the virtual classroom or organise the remote interviews using synchronous visual communication means, these shall be hosted by the Agency with the assistance of the IT Compartment and the technical secretary of the evaluation commission.

### **C. Conducting the evaluation**

12. To prepare and harmonise the evaluation stages in the blended format for the institutional and the higher education study programmes' evaluation, the head of the mission, assisted by the technical secretary, shall arrange a preliminary remote meeting via synchronous visual communication means; this meeting shall be attended by all the members of the institutional evaluation commission (the coordinator of the evaluation commission; the representative of the institutional evaluation commission in charge with managerial and financial activities; the expert evaluators in charge with the different higher education study programmes; the international expert evaluator; the students-expert evaluators, and the representative of the advisory commission). Representatives of the evaluated university shall be invited to attend the second part of the meeting, in order to establish the details of the institutional evaluation, as well as those related to the evaluation of the higher education study programmes.

13. The expert evaluators in charge with the various higher education study programmes shall carry out their evaluation activity according to the schedule arranged with the representatives of the evaluated institution and in line with the provisions of the Guidelines for evaluation of higher education study programmes / domains in a blended procedure format.



When the evaluation mission is completed, the expert evaluators shall send the following documents to the coordinator of the institutional evaluation commission and the technical secretary of the evaluation commission, in digital format: Visit sheets; Study programme quality evaluation reports and Synthetic reports. The expert evaluators shall attend all remote meetings via synchronous visual communication means, organised by the coordinator of the institutional evaluation commission or the head of the mission. The responsibility for arranging these meetings lies with the technical secretary of the commission.

14. Based on the documents uploaded by the university in the virtual classroom, the members of the institutional evaluation commission shall fill in the Evaluation report (Visit Sheet) and identify the objectives that need to be reviewed during the visit at the requesting institution. As a rule, the head of the mission and the coordinator of the evaluation team shall attend the visit. To reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, the visit at the evaluated institution will be scheduled to last one day, and may be extended in well documented circumstances. During the period of the visit, the coordinator of the evaluation commission may request face-to-face working meetings, which shall be attended by the management of the institution, the teaching staff, or the staff of the financial-accounting and administrative departments or the quality assurance department of the institution.

15. The students-expert evaluators shall conduct their evaluation activity in line with the schedule established with the representatives of the evaluated institution, and will be assisted at all times by student representatives of the university. Based on the documents uploaded by the university into the virtual classroom, student-expert evaluators shall commence to fill in their own evaluation report and identify those objectives that need to be checked during the visit at the requesting institution. As a rule, one of the student-evaluators shall conduct the face-to-face visit at the institution, within the period agreed upon with the evaluated institution. To avoid the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, the visit at the evaluated institution will be scheduled to last one day, and may be extended in well documented circumstances.

The meetings of the student-expert evaluators with the students of the evaluated higher education institution shall be held remotely, via synchronous visual communication means; these meetings shall be arranged by the contact person appointed by the institution, and hosted by ARACIS, with assistance from the technical secretary and the ARACIS IT Compartment; the recordings of these meetings shall only be saved in the ARACIS cloud.

At the end of the evaluation mission, the student-expert evaluators shall send the coordinator of the institutional evaluation commission and the technical secretary of the commission the Students' institutional quality evaluation report in digital format. The student-expert evaluators shall attend all the remote meetings via synchronous visual communication means organised with the coordinator of the institutional evaluation commission or the head of the mission. The responsibility for arranging these meetings lies with the technical secretary of the commission.

16. The evaluation activity of the international expert evaluator shall be conducted remotely, using synchronous or asynchronous communication means. The technical secretary of the institutional evaluation commission shall inform the expert evaluator about the procedure and the detailed schedule of the evaluation mission. In conducting the evaluation activity, the



international expert shall be assisted by a person appointed by the evaluated institution, and receive the Internal institutional evaluation report and a list of its annexes in English for review. The expert may request an English translation for any of the annexes accompanying this report. The responsibility for translating the requested annexes lies with the evaluated institution.

The international expert evaluator may request interviews with members of the management team of the university or of the administrative-managerial departments of the evaluated institution. These interviews shall be organised by the contact person appointed by the evaluated institution, and be conducted remotely via synchronous communication means. As applicable, simultaneous interpreting shall be ensured by the person appointed by the evaluated institution.

During the institutional evaluation visit, as well as before and after the visit, the appointed international expert may be invited to attend debates and information exchange sessions together with the members of the expert evaluators commission; such sessions shall be conducted remotely using synchronous and/or asynchronous communication means, and shall be organised by the head of the mission and the coordinator of the evaluation commission together with the technical secretary and with assistance from the IT Compartment of ARACIS.

At the end of the evaluation mission, the international expert shall send the coordinator of the institutional evaluation commission and the technical secretary of the commission the International expert's institutional quality evaluation report in digital format.

17. During the evaluation visit, as well as before and after the visit, the members of the expert evaluators commission shall have sessions for documentation, review of additional documents, filling in the Visit Sheet, discussions and information exchange, discussions with the students of the evaluated institution, employers, graduates etc.; such sessions shall be conducted remotely via synchronous or asynchronous communication means. These activities are organised by the coordinator of the evaluation commission, with assistance from the technical secretary of the commission and support from the ARACIS IT Compartment.

The representative of the Advisory Commission shall be invited to attend all these meetings, and he/she shall participate as an observer at all the stages of the institutional and higher education study programme evaluation procedure.

At the end of the mission, the representative of the Advisory Commission shall draft a report on how the remote evaluation activities were carried out, and send such report to the head of the mission and the technical secretary of the evaluation commission in digital format.

18. At the end of the evaluation, the head of the mission and the members of the expert evaluators commission shall have a video conference meeting with the representatives of the higher education institution, where they will present the main findings of the evaluation and the recommendations for quality improvement.

19. All remote meetings organised using synchronous visual communication means shall be recorded after receiving the consent of the attendants, and saved in the ARACIS cloud. The remote meetings with the students of the higher education institution shall be organised by the coordinator of the expert evaluators commission with assistance from the technical secretary



and support from the ARACIS IT Compartment, and the recordings of such meetings will only be saved in the ARACIS cloud.

20. The reports of the members of the expert evaluators commission shall be accompanied by the recordings of the interviews and discussions held during the remote evaluation.

#### **D. Completion of the external evaluation report**

21. After receiving all the individual reports, the head of the mission, together with the coordinator of the institutional evaluation commission shall draft the Preliminary report of the institutional evaluation commission, which will include the conclusions of the evaluations on the selected higher education study programmes. The head of the mission, through the technical secretary of the evaluation commission, shall send this report to the rector of the evaluated institution, who shall provide comments regarding any material errors resulting from improper or incomplete understanding of certain aspects related to the evaluated institution. The preliminary report shall not contain the proposed judgment resulting from the evaluation, and it shall be accompanied by the reports of the students and the report of the international expert.

22. Based on the answer received from the rector of the evaluated institution, the head of the mission and the coordinator of the evaluation commission shall finalise the Report of the institutional evaluation commission and send it to the External Quality Evaluation Department who will draft its own report.