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Contents

Abbreviations and Acronyms	4
Rationale.....	5
I. Introduction	6
II. Overview of ARACIS	8
2.1 Legal framework	8
2.2 Mission and objectives	9
2.3 Values.....	10
2.4 Main areas of work	10
III. Management and Internal Organization	12
3.1 Quality Assurance Strategy and Policy	14
3.2 Resource Management	15
IV. Core Activities and Procedures	22
4.1 HEIs Application and the Evaluation Commissions.....	23
4.2 Institutions' Self-Assessment Reports (SARs)	24
4.3 Evaluation Visits	24
4.4 Evaluation Reports	25
4.5 Decisions of the Council	26
4.6 Appeals.....	26
4.7 Follow-up Activities	28
V. Communication.....	29
5.1 Communication Policy and Procedure	29
5.2 External Communication	30
5.3 Internal Communication	30
Annex. Building a Communication Plan	32

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ANC	National Authority for Qualifications
ARACIS	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ARACIP	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance on Pre-university Education
BEX	Executive Board of ARACIS Council
CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
CNEAA	National Council for Academic Evaluation and Assessment
CNATDCU	National Council for Attesting Titles, Diplomas, and Certificates
CNCS	National Council for Scientific Research
CNFIS	National Council for Higher Education Funding
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENAE	European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EU	European Union
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HR	Human Resources
IM	Internal Manual
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
MoER	Ministry of Education and Research
NIS	National Institute of Statistics
NRE	National Register of Evaluators
QA	Quality Assurance
QMS	Quality Management System
RAS	Reimbursable Advisory Services
ROF	Regulation of Organization and Functioning
WB	World Bank

Rationale

The Advisory Services Agreement on Technical Assistance to Enhance Quality Assurance in Higher Education System in Romania is aimed at improving the capacity of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE)¹ and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to govern the quality assurance of the higher education system in Romania to support increased attainment, quality, and efficiency of the Romanian higher education system.

This Agreement is designed to support the improvement of the administrative capacity of ARACIS by developing procedures for the internal organization of its activities and training of staff. In line with these objectives, recommendations for ARACIS new Regulation of Functioning and Organization (ROF) and Internal Manual (IM) will be provided, aiming to improve management practices. The ROF would address overlapping or missing functions, and the IM would solve the procedural gap and update organizational needs.

Scope of the report. This report presents recommendations to revise the current Internal Manual of Quality Procedures and Activities in order to fit in the new proposed external evaluation framework. It describes the quality management system (QMS) of ARACIS, identifying principles related to organization and resources, allowing the ARACIS staff to understand and implement the quality assurance policy.

The Internal Manual of Quality Procedures and Activities is a methodological and operational reference for the Agency's management and staff involved at various levels of evaluation and quality assurance (QA) services. It presents a set of concepts and methods for the Agency to develop and maintain a QMS.

Methodological Aspects. The World Bank team conducted a series of activities to inform the findings of this report:

- (a) An in-depth and continuous analysis of ARACIS policies, methodologies, operations, and procedures conducted throughout the project implementation.
- (b) An online questionnaire aimed at consolidating opinions of ARACIS employees and Executive Board (BEX) members on organizational and human resources management aspects. The findings of the current study are also based on statistics that resulted from the questionnaire.
- (c) Qualitative interviews were carried out with the Executive Board (BEX) and administrative staff representatives to identify procedural gaps of the current organization flow and the needs and areas for improvement. The goal was to provide recommendations for improving the new ROF, job descriptions, and alignment of the departments' functions.
- (d) Informative meetings with Mr. Iordan Petrescu, President of ARACIS, who regularly provided direct inputs about ARACIS's human resources and operational procedures.

¹ The name of the Ministry was changed from Ministry of National Education (MoNE) to Ministry of Education and Research (MoER) in November 2019.

I. Introduction

The Internal Manual of Quality Procedures and Activities aims to make a brief presentation of ARACIS's internal quality assurance policy and its processes, procedures, and mechanisms that may consolidate a comprehensive internal QA system. This document is a proposal to be fully harmonized with the revised QA methodology that will be implemented by ARACIS.

Objectives. The implementation of formalized procedures and activities meets the following objectives:

- Creates an operational reference for ARACIS to conduct the QA evaluations and operations in Romanian higher education.
- Provides a formal framework for the execution of professional, administrative, and financial operations in accordance with the general management principles, the regulatory provisions of ARACIS, and the Romanian legislation.
- Increases staff responsibility and productivity by optimizing the flows of documents and procedures.
- Implements effective internal control.

The effectiveness of the management system is determined by compliance and application of the procedures. ARACIS must implement regular controls to mitigate the risks resulting from irregularities, negligence, or execution judgment or understanding errors.

More specifically, the Internal Manual describes the main procedures and activities related to the QMS processes, including the internal control, the procedures to be implemented by all the Agency's staff, as well as their respective tasks; and the resources used for undertaking effective actions, such as human, material, and financial resources.

Update of the Manual. Updating the Manual is as important as creating it. This should be an ongoing process to preserve its effectiveness and relevance. The updates may be motivated, for instance, by:

- Changes in the Agency or its activities, according to the decisions of the authorities, and the ARACIS Council.
- Changes to systems and procedures with the aim of improving existing procedures to deal with new situations.
- Changes made necessary by the application of the laws and rules in force in Romania.
- Changes in the assignment of staff or their tasks.
- Arrangement modifications in the organization of the Agency.

The responsibility for updating the Internal Manual of Quality Procedures and Activities resides with the Internal Quality Assurance Officer, with the approval of the ARACIS Council.

Expected results. This Internal Manual of Quality Procedures and Activities will support the continuous improvement of ARACIS QMS through the following:

1. Identify Agency's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks based on its objectives.
2. Analyze the results.

3. Develop an action plan, strategy, and priority objectives based on the results:
 - Consolidate strengths: formalize effective procedures, promote good practices.
 - Improve weaknesses: simplify procedures, search for solutions, and means of implementation, anticipate consequences of planned actions.
 - Prepare the actions: maintain relevant actions, reverse actions into objectives, prioritize actions and set priorities, plan resources, appoint responsible for actions, set timetables, and deadlines.
 - Define relevant indicators: adopt measurement tools and methods, satisfaction questionnaires; choose simple, accurate, measurable indicators.
4. Implement actions:
 - Motivate and raise awareness of staff and stakeholders.
 - Inform actions.
 - Implement the actions defined in the plan.
 - Perform document management.
 - Use effective tools and means.
5. Evaluate the actions.
6. Build a balance sheet highlighting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks.
7. Ensure follow-up.

The QMS is based on the principle of continuous improvement through a series of corrective and preventive actions.

Structure of procedures. The content of procedures is structured as follows:

- The person(s) responsible for the procedure/activity, which ensures the application of documents related to the QMS and their update.
- The definition aims to describe the purpose of the procedure/activity.
- The field of application defines the sectors of activities and the potential limits of application (where, when, and why).
- The objectives specify the actions that the Agency should achieve by applying the procedure.
- The activities resume the procedure (each step determines who does what, where, when, and how).
- The reference documents are the standardized internal supporting documents that govern the procedure and represent the resources necessary to carry out the procedure. These may be regulations, recommendations, registration, operating methods, etc.
- The input and output elements of the procedure.
- The persons intervening in the procedure.

II. Overview of ARACIS

2.1 Legal framework

ARACIS was established in 2005, based on the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education, and the subsequent law (Law no. 87/2006). The Agency took over the responsibilities of the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Assessment (CNEAA, 1993-2005) and changed its focus on accreditation activity. The law provides the framework of quality assurance in Romanian higher education, in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

ARACIS is an autonomous public institution of national interest with legal status and financial autonomy. It is funded by evaluation fees paid by HEIs, and projects (both European and Romanian projects financed by European funds). Its independence is statutory. Its operational independence from HEIs and the Romanian Government is guaranteed by official documents.

The Government, particularly the MoER, has no direct institutional influence on ARACIS's decisions. ARACIS autonomously defines its approaches to QA, the mechanisms, and methodologies to conduct QA evaluations, and independently deliberates and decides the outcomes of these processes. The MoER issues the official accreditation and re-accreditation to HEIs and programs. However, these decisions are taken based on the recommendations provided by ARACIS.

Since 2009, ARACIS has been a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). An external evaluation of ENQA members is conducted every five years. ARACIS renewed its membership for the second time in 2018. However, a follow-up report was requested by the ENQA Board on the actions undertaken to meet the recommendations within two years after the completion of the review. ARACIS has also been registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2009.

Box 1. Legislative and Policy Framework

The legal institutional framework establishing and regulating ARACIS's activity refers to the following regulations:

- *Emergency Ordinance of the Romanian Government (GEO) no. 75/2005 on ensuring the quality of education, with subsequent amendments and completions.*
- *Decision of the Romanian Government (GD) no. 915/2017 regarding the amendment of the annex to Decision no. 1418/2006 for the approval of the External Evaluation Methodology, standards, reference standards, and list of performance indicators of ARACIS.*
- *GD no. 1731/2006 for the approval of tariffs perceived by ARACIS for authorization and accreditation of HEIs study programs and for external evaluation of the quality of education.*
- *Law of National Education (LEN) no. 1/2011, with subsequent amendments and completions.*
- *GD no. 369/2013 for the approval of the Methodology regarding the accreditation of the fields of master studies based on the accredited master study programs.*
- *Orders of the Minister of Education and Research, for the regulation and/ or capitalization of specific evaluation activities, which are periodically elaborated.*

ARACIS is a member of several other international QA associations: the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), the European

Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAE), and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

ARACIS has also been registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2009. In 2012, ARACIS received authorization to award the EUR-ACE certification and label to engineering study programs.

2.2 Mission and objectives

The mission of ARACIS is to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) and study programs at all levels – Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral studies – as well as to contribute, together with HEIs, to the continuous improvement of quality. The Agency also aims to contribute to the development of an institutional culture of quality in higher education.

ARACIS aims to ensure quality standards for study programs and higher education qualifications and to support continuous improvement of the HEIs quality management. At the same time, ARACIS provides the society with a coherent image of the higher education system's quality and promotes the internationalization of the assessment process.

ARACIS provides the external quality evaluation of Romanian HEIs, which includes 55 public higher education institutions (HEIs), 35 accredited private HEIs, and 9 private HEIs with temporary authorization. The total enrolment in Romanian HEIs in 2019 amounted to approximately 543,000 students².

The **primary objective** of ARACIS is to ensure a quality higher education for competitive human capital and sustainable socio-economic development.

Along with this main objective, ARACIS has defined several specific objectives:

- Improve the external evaluation methodology in full compliance with the ESG.
- Continuously improve the quality of the guidelines corresponding to the methodology by increasing their applicative value and relevance for the beneficiaries.
- Increase the role of students and employers in the education QA and evaluation processes.
- Accelerate the transition from the evaluation of input data to the evaluation of learning outcomes, for instance, insertion of graduates in the economic and social environment as a measure of the education QA results.
- Continue the collaboration with the MoER to promote principles, regulations, and standards for ensuring unitary and comparable quality for the entire Romanian higher education system.
- Develop the references for inter-university ranking according to quality performance.
- Develop the relations between the national qualifications framework and QA, between ARACIS and ANC, respectively.
- Collaborate with CNFIS, CNCS, and CNATDCU to improve the compatibility of performance indicators, including those relevant to HEIs financing.

² National Institute of Statistics, Tempo Online.

2.3 Values

ARACIS promotes openness to the diversity of HEIs and QA approaches, and shares the following values:

Transparency: ARACIS publishes public interest information regarding the evaluation of HEIs and study programs, as well as policies, methodologies, procedures, and criteria to substantiate its decisions and reports.

Independence: ARACIS promotes operational independence in its decisions and supports the autonomy of HEIs.

Collaboration: ARACIS works in close cooperation and consultation with HEIs, the National Council of Rectors, HEIs stakeholders, European partners, and agencies.

Integrity: ARACIS acts with integrity and in a fair, equitable, impartial, objective, and professional manner.

User Orientation: ARACIS continuously adapts its services to the needs and expectations of beneficiaries.

Accountability: ARACIS takes responsibility for all stakeholders through its governance structures, and it has complaints and appeals procedures in place to ensure accountability for all decisions.

Trust: ARACIS works based on trust in the quality of higher education.

Figure 1. Values of ARACIS



2.4 Main areas of work

ARACIS has two main areas of focus in the context of external QA activities. ARACIS conducts external evaluations to accredit or authorize study programs and HEIs. ARACIS also conducts periodic external evaluations (periodic reviews) of accredited study programs and HEIs.

ARACIS's other QA activities include overall higher education system evaluations, external evaluations of teaching staff within training departments, and external evaluations of distance learning and part-time programs. ARACIS is also involved in research activities in the higher education sector. Through these, ARACIS aims to align its activities with the recent developments in QA and internationalization.

A detailed list of the main tasks in QA and accreditation performed by ARACIS is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Main tasks performed by ARACIS

ARACIS performs tasks in the field of accreditation, as follows:

- *Develops the accreditation methodology and standards for various types of programs and HEIs (to be endorsed by MoER and approved through Government Decision).*
- *Evaluates and proposes the authorization or accreditation of HEIs and study programs. MoER prepares the legal documents for setting up the higher education structures based on the accreditation reports.*

ARACIS also performs tasks in the field of quality assurance, as follows:

- *Develops and reviews the national reference standards and performance indicators for quality evaluation and assurance in higher education.*
- *Collaborates with MoER and ARACIP in elaborating and promoting policies and strategies of action to increase the quality of education in Romania.*
- *Organizes annual consultations with HEIs to establish quality assurance priorities.*
- *Develops and publishes its own procedures for external evaluation of quality in education.*
- *Concludes service contracts with Romanian and foreign HEIs for the external quality evaluation of programs and HEIs, as well as for the evaluation of joint programs.*
- *Performs the quality evaluation of programs and HEIs, at the MoER's request. The terms and conditions regarding the evaluation activity are established by contract.*
- *Publishes the results of external evaluations.*
- *Publishes handbooks, guidelines, synthesis papers of good practice in quality assurance and evaluation.*
- *Periodically elaborates system analyzes on the quality of higher education in Romania.*
- *Collaborates with European peer agencies to develop and implement effective measures for improving the quality of higher education programs.*
- *Elaborates the Professional code of ethics for ARACIS's experts.*
- *Publishes an annual report on its own activity.*
- *Elaborates self-evaluation reports to prepare external evaluation of international associations such as ENQA, EQAR, etc.*

ARACIS's activities are in a continuous quality improvement process to meet internal and external stakeholders' needs and expectations.

III. Management and Internal Organization

ARACIS has implemented Quality Management System (QMS) to comply with the ESG and the Internal/Managerial Control Standards for public institutions.

ARACIS's QMS involves all the institution's actors, management and technical staff, administrative staff, and experts. The "process" approach is a cross-cutting method that decomposes activities and breaks in with a traditional vertical structure.

The implementation of this approach involves identifying, describing, and analyzing the Agency's QMS in view of optimization, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

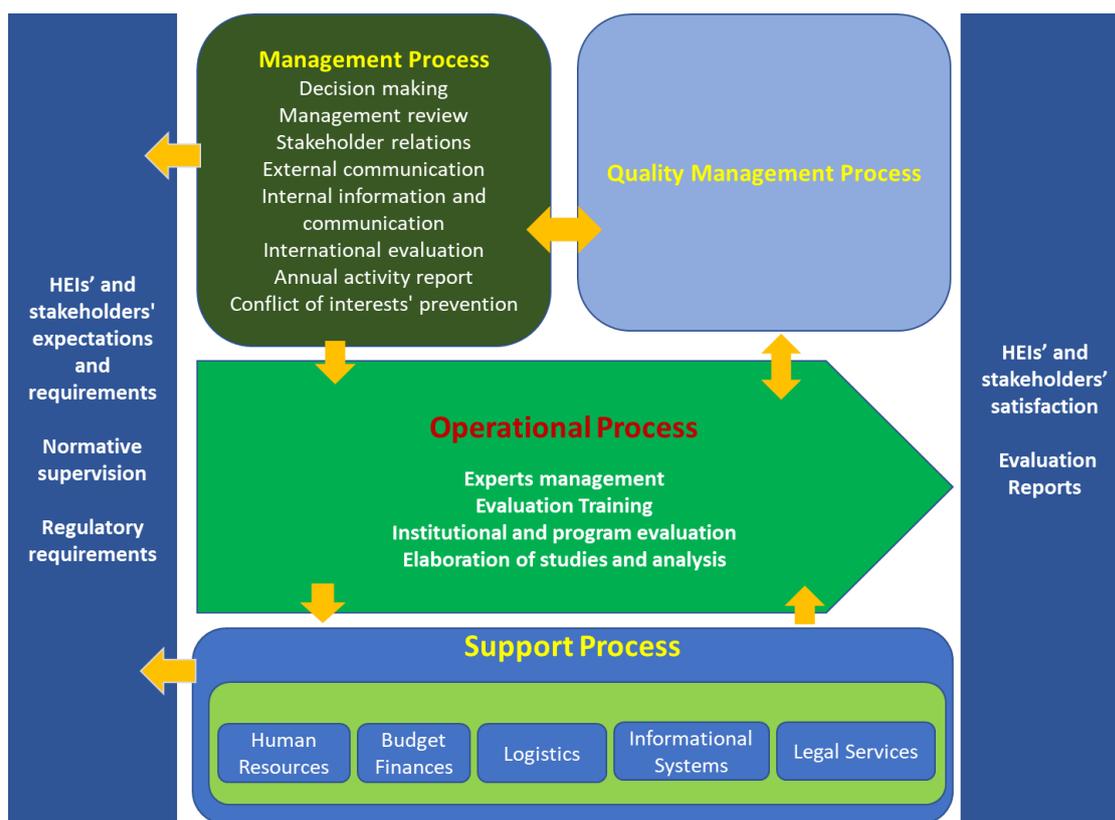
Figure 3. Quality Management System



ARACIS's QMS consists of four interconnected processes, as described below:

1. **The Management Process:** it contributes to policy setting and implementation of objectives within the Agency, such as governance, strategies of implementation of the quality approach, internal and external communications.
2. **The Operational Process:** it contributes to achieving objectives by implementing activities related to the evaluation services, such as conducting the evaluation activities, organization of the visits, the work of the evaluation experts, etc.
3. **The Quality Management Process:** it contributes to the evaluation, measurement, and collection of data necessary for the analysis of satisfaction and performance, such as the selection of indicators, data collection, analysis, satisfaction and performance, self-assessment, internal and external audits, review of preventive and corrective actions, etc.
4. **The Support Process:** it is the administrative and technical support for the operational process's proper functioning, providing the necessary resources.

Figure 4. Detailed Quality Management System



The last two processes – the Quality Management Process and the Support Process – are beyond the scope of this document. The Management Process and the Operational Process are described below.

The Management Process is represented by the overall organization and management techniques of the Agency. Through this process, the ARACIS Council regularly revises the Agency's strategic objectives, plans its activities, and makes decisions. Therefore, it depends on the authority and responsibility of the ARACIS Council.

The management process aims to ensure the Agency's overall functioning considering the general policy and strategic objectives defined by its decision-making bodies.

It is also the process that executes the internal and external communication policy, the system of partnership and international relations, the strategic approach, and that creates accountability. This process considers the Agency's external and internal environments by measuring the decision-making risks' sustainability.

The management process oversees the three other QMS processes (Operational, Quality Management, and Support) and describes the organization that allows for the system's overall cohesion. Managing, leading, organizing, guiding, deciding, analyzing, communicating, evaluating, and improving are the main applicable verbs of action.

System Procedures (SP) and Operational Procedures (OP) have been developed and implemented in ARACIS according to the Romanian legislation applicable to public institutions. These procedures aim at implementing, monitoring, and improving the quality of Agency's activities. The management process is permanently monitored and evaluated through monthly meetings of the ARACIS Council

and the Monitoring Commission and weekly meetings of the ARACIS Executive Board. An overall, final evaluation takes place at the preparation of the Annual Activity Report of ARACIS.

The Operational (or Implementation) Process corresponds to the execution of ARACIS’s evaluation mission and, thus, falls within the scope of the Agency’s “service delivery.” It covers the entire service and follow-up lifecycle, as detailed in Figure 5 below.

The operational process aims to contribute to the delivery of external evaluation services. The process is grouped into five main categories of procedures: (1) External evaluation; (2) Management of expert evaluators; (3) On-site visits; (4) Delivery and reporting; and (5) Follow-up.

Figure 5. Main procedures of the operational process



3.1 Quality Assurance Strategy and Policy

ARACIS maintains continuous dialogue and cooperation with all stakeholders involved in the educational process, including the academic community, candidates for study programs, employers, public authorities, and public administration to fulfill its mission.

Quality Policy Statement: *ARACIS is continuously committed to contributing to developing a “culture of quality” in universities and Romanian society by underlying and strengthening the role of internal quality assurance systems.*

ARACIS has developed a broader strategy for 2018-2021, identifying issues and challenges the Agency faces and proposing concrete measures to overcome them. The strategy is implemented through annual strategic plans that define the main action lines and priorities to be developed in the period.

The Quality [Strategy](#) and Policy are communicated to all members of the Agency and available online on the ARACIS website (www.aracis.ro).

3.2 Resource Management

ARACIS is an autonomous and independent public institution of national interest that must comply with the legal regulations for public institutions.

The ARACIS Council ensures that adequate human, material, and financial resources and means are made available to achieve the quality objectives of the Agency. This contributes to successful integrated resource management.

3.2.1. Human Resources

In terms of human resources, knowing how to mobilize teams should be a priority for ARACIS. Everyone's involvement is paramount to achieving strategic goals and quality policy. The main strength of the Agency rests primarily on the competence of the staff. It is essential to be rigorous in recruiting the staff and the team's integration, the continuing education and the maintenance of the skills, or the distribution of responsibilities within the Agency.

ARACIS should contract the appropriate number of specialists (technical staff, Council members, and experts) to achieve its targeted objectives. In this respect, ARACIS should refine its organizational structure, including the number of staff and their set of competencies.

The [organizational structure of ARACIS](#) consists of:

ARACIS Council
ARACIS Executive Board
External Quality Assessment Department
Accreditation Department
Permanent Specialty Commissions of Experts (14)
Consultative and Audit Commission
Commission of Ethics
Disciplinary Commission
Monitoring Commission
Technical and Administrative Staff

This structure aims at ensuring the Agency's independence and increasing transparency.

[The ARACIS Council](#) ensures the programmatic orientation of the Agency. The Council comprises of 21 members – 17 higher education professors, two student representatives, one employer representative, and one higher education professor who represents the unions in higher education.

Individuals who currently hold official positions within the Presidency, Government, Parliament, or a Rector position at an HEI cannot serve as members of the ARACIS Council while employed in any of the roles mentioned above. This restraint aims to ensure the independence and transparency of the Agency.

The student representatives are nominated yearly by the students' unions.

Selection. All the members of the Council are selected through a competitive process. They perform their activity based on a four (4) year management contract concluded with the Agency. The contract is annually renewed for student representatives.

Executive Board (BEX). Five members of the ARACIS Council form its **Executive Board**, responsible for the Agency’s operative management.

Selection. Two of the five members of the Executive Board, the President and Vice-president of the Council, are elected by their peers via a confidential/ secret voting procedure. The President appoints the other three members of the Executive Board: two Department Directors, for Accreditation and External Quality Assessment Departments, and a Secretary-General.

The **External Quality Assessment Department** and the **Accreditation Department** comprise quality assurance experts, members of the Council.

<p>Consultative and Audit Commission</p>	<p>The Consultative and Audit Commission has the mission to verify the evaluation procedures and support the Agency’s decisions. It harmonizes HEIs and Agency’s interests by assessing the impact of ARACIS QA regulations.</p> <p>The members of the Commission assist the institutional evaluation teams providing an objective and transparent view on the evaluation processes. They are also part of the Appeal Settlement Commissions.</p>
<p>Commission of Ethics</p>	<p>The Commission of Ethics ensures the ethical and professional conduct of the QA activities performed by ARACIS. It functions under the Code of Ethics and norms of professional conduct.</p>
<p>Disciplinary Commission</p>	<p>The Disciplinary Commission of ARACIS analyzes the actions of staff and experts notified as possible disciplinary violations and propose the appropriate measures.</p>
<p>Monitoring Commission</p>	<p>The Monitoring Commission ensures the monitoring, coordination, and methodological guidance of the implementation and development of the ARACIS internal management control system.</p> <p>It comprises the heads of the departments in the first management level of ARACIS organizational structure.</p>
<p>Permanent Specialty Commissions</p>	<p>The Permanent Specialty Commissions are permanent structures operating under the authority of the ARACIS Council.</p> <p>There are 15 permanent specialty commissions – 14 for the academic domains and one employers register. The commissions perform their activity based on the Regulation of the permanent specialty commissions approved by the ARACIS Council.</p> <p>Each Commission comprises between 7 and 13 expert evaluators and one student evaluator. Each Permanent Specialty Commission is led by a Chairman with the support of a Secretary of the Commission. The activities of these commissions benefit of the support of the ARACIS expert evaluators enrolled in the National Register of Evaluators (NRE).</p>

➤ **ARACIS Staff**

The organizational structure of [ARACIS permanent staff](#) consists of 72 positions. Currently, it comprises 28 individuals, who were selected through a competitive process, under the authority of the President of ARACIS. That leaves a number of 44 positions still vacant, which accounts for 60 percent of the positions in the organization chart.

In this respect, ARACIS will revise the organizational structure, including the number of technical staff and their set of competencies necessary to achieve its mission and objectives. New positions will be created based on the needs for additional functions, and others will be dropped in line with the new organizational structure, and additional staff should be hired to fill in the vacant positions. The division of tasks and responsibilities are stipulated in job descriptions and will be further revised to correspond to the new organizational vision and ROF.

Strategic Leadership Behaviors. To accomplish its mission, the Agency should incentivize effective and productive working methods. It is essential that the Agency practices mobilizing leadership and does not settle for simple management techniques. The leadership practices of managers at all organizational levels must be linked to the Agency's strategic objectives.

➤ **Expert Evaluators**

Competent expert evaluators are critical to qualitative external assessments. ARACIS aims to find and maintain professional and durable partnerships with national and foreign experts.

[External evaluators of ARACIS](#). ARACIS successfully developed a comprehensive database of evaluators – including academics, international evaluators, employers, and students who applied for registration. The database is structured in five registers of experts: National Register of Evaluators (NRE), ARACIS Register of International Evaluators, Register of Expert Evaluators – Ph.D. Coordinators, ARACIS National Register of Evaluators Students (NRE-S), and Register of Employers.

NRE comprises national and international professors and associate professors, with relevant professional activity, moral integrity, competence, and experience in ensuring the quality of education at national and international levels. Candidates should undergo a transparent selection process approved by the ARACIS Council to become NRE-registered evaluators.

The registration and evaluation of experts are performed through an online platform. The evaluation is based on the QA methodology and standards of ARACIS. This process aims to create and permanently update the database of ARACIS expert evaluators that generates NRE.

Student evaluators represent the main students' unions active in Romania: National Alliance of Student Organizations of Romania (ANOSR), National Union of Students of Romania (UNSR), Union of Students of Romania (USR). Student evaluators are selected after completing procedures and training organized by students' unions with the support of ARACIS.

Students also participate as full members of the ARACIS Permanent Specialty Commissions. They are registered in the **ARACIS National Register of Evaluators Students** are involved as committee members in the institutional and program QA evaluations.

➤ **Training of evaluators**

Training contributes to the consistent and coherent implementation of the QA methodologies and criteria, standards, and performance indicators. ARACIS organizes periodical informative workshops

and training sessions for the expert evaluators on QA related topics. It also supports the training of student evaluators with lectures and practical activities.

ARACIS is committed to continuously improve communication with HEIs. The quality of interaction and collaboration between ARACIS and HEIs depends on building and consolidating trust and, implicitly, the partnership between the evaluator and the evaluated entity. In addition to the technical aspects, the training of expert evaluators also addresses ethical and behavioral principles.

➤ **Code of Ethics**

ARACIS Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct sets out the rules on ethical and professional conduct and proposes the principles that govern ARACIS activities to ensure trust, authority, and reputation.

The activity of ARACIS staff and experts must be governed by professional competence, integrity, objectivity, confidentiality, neutrality, independence, respect, and loyalty.

The [Code of Ethics](#) is available on the ARACIS website.

➤ **Preventing Conflict of Interest**

The prevention of conflict of interest using the transparency policy. Consequently, ARACIS staff and experts must declare their connections of interest related to the activity of the Agency.

The ARACIS Council must determine if there are risks of conflicts of interest. The declaration of interests, which is a legal requirement, is protective for both the employee and the institution that receives it.

➤ **Confidentiality Policy**

ARACIS operates a confidentiality policy in line with the General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR (Directive 95/46/EC). ARACIS is entrusted with confidential information. To comply with the regulations in place, it must maintain confidentiality and limit disclosure of such information. In this respect, ARACIS undertakes to comply with the GDPR in all data processing operations. ARACIS may provide additional notes on specific situations when it collects or processes personal data.

The [Confidentiality Policy](#) is available on the ARACIS website.

3.2.2. Material Resources (Infrastructure)

ARACIS provides its technical staff, members of the Council and quality assessment commissions, experts, and collaborators with quality and inspiring work environment, equipped with modern technical tools. New information systems that will ease the daily activities and operations are under development.

The new IT platform aims to collect and manage data from universities to facilitate the accreditation and external evaluation processes. The design of the platform will increase the transparency of the external assessment process and reporting methods.

The National Register of ARACIS Evaluators will also be upgraded to support permanent updates of data on evaluators, their training, and evaluation according to the methodologies in place.

ARACIS staff has the option to work from home using teleworking for activities that can be performed remotely. The teleworking schedule of staff shall be priorly agreed upon with the President of ARACIS. The Agency shall ensure its staff with the appropriate IT equipment, data protection, and training.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which imposed reorganization of work, ARACIS reacted extremely fast. During the lockdown, the staff started to work from home and continued their activities.

3.2.3. Financial Resources

ARACIS is an autonomous and independent public institution, of national interest, with legal personality and financial autonomy. According to the legislation (Government Ordinance no. 75/2005, and Law no. 87/2006), ARACIS is financed entirely from its revenues. ARACIS revenues come from:

- Revenues from the QA contract concluded with MoER.
- Authorization/ accreditation/ evaluation fees, proposed by ARACIS and approved through GD.
- Non-reimbursable external funds, from participation in national and international projects and programs, donations, sponsorships, other legally constituted sources.

On financial management, ARACIS complies with the national regulations in place and the applicant guidelines under specific operational programs, mainly the Operational Program Administrative Capacity and Operational Program Human Capital.

The financial management includes the following main activities: (1) organizing accounting records, (2) internal control, and (3) budgeting and financial reporting.

1. Organizing accounting records include the organization and managing of accounting records. The chart of accounts and the account's contents used by ARACIS are regulated through the Order no. 129/2019 of the Ministry of Public Finance. Transactions are entered into accounts in chronological order by the date of the issue or receipt of the documents. As such, the accounting journal is edited monthly.

Projects' accounting is recorded in separate accounts using a specific coding system. Projects operations are similar to the current activities of ARACIS, except that the supporting documents (invoices, travel orders, expenditure claims, and any other documents) are marked with each projects' code when the expenditure is initiated.

The Economic Department keeps precise and accurate records of expenditures for all projects implemented by ARACIS. All supporting documents are marked with the codes of the project where they will be reimbursed. Regular financial reports are prepared for each project. These reports are based on the expenditures incurred by ARACIS for project purposes. The expenses are found in the accounting records. Accounting documents (accounting notes) are attached to each project's financial reports, showing the amount spent/ claimed. Thus, the analytical accounts show an accurate picture of each project. The financial responsible must know how to comply with EU, national, and contract/ funding regulations to ensure the institution's efficient financial management and the implemented projects.

2. Internal control includes ex-ante or ex-post verifications on transactions aimed at preventing, identifying, and correcting any potential irregularities in the adequate use of the financial resources. The Economic Department performs monthly verifications on the expenditure reports, reconciliations of transactions (reconciliation with the balance sheet), documents verification (registers, balance sheets), and budget execution (informing the President of ARACIS on the monthly planned expenditures).

Segregation of duties is an essential part of internal control. It ensures that accounting responsibilities are entrusted to different persons. Independent persons should be responsible for the operational and financial elements of each transaction. In other words, the initiation and verification functions are separated. Segregation of duties and responsibilities mitigate the risk of error, fraud, or irregularity.

3. Budgeting and financial reporting include methods for monitoring the overall budget and financial reports, in compliance with the national regulations and the applicants' guidelines under specific operational programs. Adequate budgeting implies accurate forecasting of expenses. ARACIS carries out budgeting both at the institutional level and project level, according to their objectives. The financial reporting process is similar. ARACIS must report according to the model required through the national regulations (balance sheets, registers, etc.) and the model imposed by the financing authorities (progress reports, etc.). ARACIS is also responsible for ensuring that each project's budget is used within the timeframe allocated through the contract, following national and EU regulations.

According to the data published by the Ministry of Finance³, the budget of ARACIS slightly increased between 2016 to 2019 from 16 million lei to 17.3 million lei. The planned budget for 2020 is around 18.5 million lei.

The financial planning and management capacity of ARACIS has strengthened in recent years, improving the adequacy of budget proposals and the accuracy of expenses forecasted. The percentage of actual expenditures against the planned budget increased from 43.29 percent in 2016 to 87.15 percent in 2019.

Figure 6. ARACIS's Revenue (2016-2019)

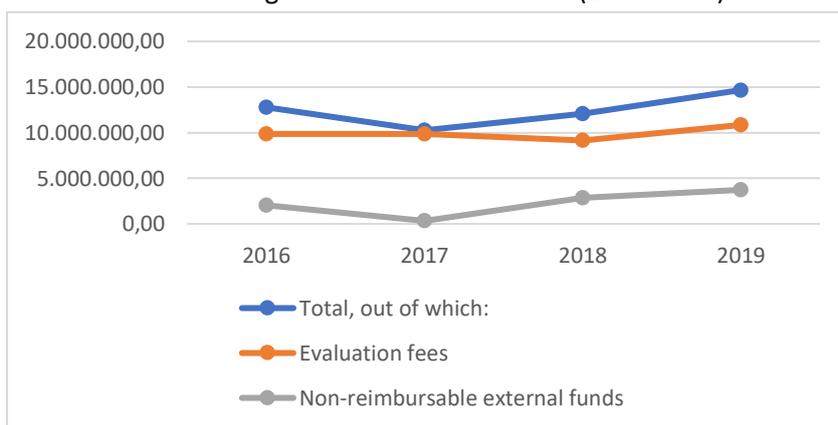


Table 1. Planned budget vs. executed budget (2016-2019)

2016		2017		2018		2019	
Planned budget	Actual expenditures						
16,079,066	6,960,263	15,480,796	8,961,759	16,829,266	11,530,951	17,361,410	15,129,713
43.29%		57.89%		68.52%		87.15%	

³ Ministry of Public Finance, National Reporting System, <http://www.mfinante.gov.ro/>.

Securing adequate and predictable funding is critical. ARACIS’s primary revenue sources are the evaluation fees and non-reimbursable external funds, particularly European funds from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Yearly, approximately ¾ of the revenues come from evaluation fees and ¼ from non-reimbursable external funds. An exceptional situation was encountered in 2017 when more than 95 percent of the ARACIS’s revenue came from evaluation fees.

Table 2. Sources of revenues (2016-2019)

2016		2017		2018		2019	
Evaluation fees	Non-reimbursable external funds						
77.17%	15.93%	95.88%	3.27%	75.65%	23.63%	73.95%	25.46%

When it comes to expenditures, the allocation for salaries more than halved in the period 2016-2019, from 73 percent to 31 percent, respectively. Simultaneously, the allocation for projects financed from non-reimbursable external funds steadily increased, from 0.24 percent in 2016 to 27 percent in 2019. The allocation for goods and services also experienced a slight increase, from 26.5 percent in 2016 to 40 percent in 2019.

Table 3. Types of expenditures (2016-2019)

2016			2017		
Salaries	Goods & services	Non-reimbursable external funds	Salaries	Goods & services	Non-reimbursable external funds
73.22%	26.49%	0.24%	60.40%	31.74%	6.76%
2018			2019		
Salaries	Goods & services	Non-reimbursable external funds	Salaries	Goods & services	Non-reimbursable external funds
40.34%	37.82%	21.83%	31.18%	40.35%	27.34%

IV. Core Activities and Procedures

ARACIS's main activities regard the three types of QA assessments they conduct – temporary authorization⁴, accreditation, and periodical evaluation.

These three types of QA evaluations apply to both HEIs and study programs. However, in the case of study programs, temporary authorization is only used for first cycle programs (Bachelor) when presented alongside an application for temporary authorization for a new HEI. Hence, in the case of the second cycle (Master) and a new first cycle (Bachelor) programs proposed by already accredited institutions, only accreditation and periodical evaluations are conducted. Moreover, programs of studies at the second cycle (Masters) are assessed not at the level of individual study programs, but as overarching study fields.

ARACIS also provides the evaluation of doctoral schools and doctoral programs. The periodic evaluation of the doctoral programs is performed on fields of doctoral studies, every five years, on contract basis. The doctoral schools are evaluated every five years within the periodical evaluation process of the Organizing Institution of Doctoral University Studies (IOSUD), which is usually carried out as part of the HEI's institutional evaluation. The periodic evaluation of IOSUD is carried out, as a rule, within the institutional evaluation of the coordinating HEI of the respective IOSUD.

Audits will be made available to HEIs that obtained the highest results qualifications in their Accreditation or Periodical Evaluation Processes. In those cases, HEI will be entitled to carry out the Accreditation and Periodical evaluation of their study programs, including at Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral levels, following their IQA procedures.

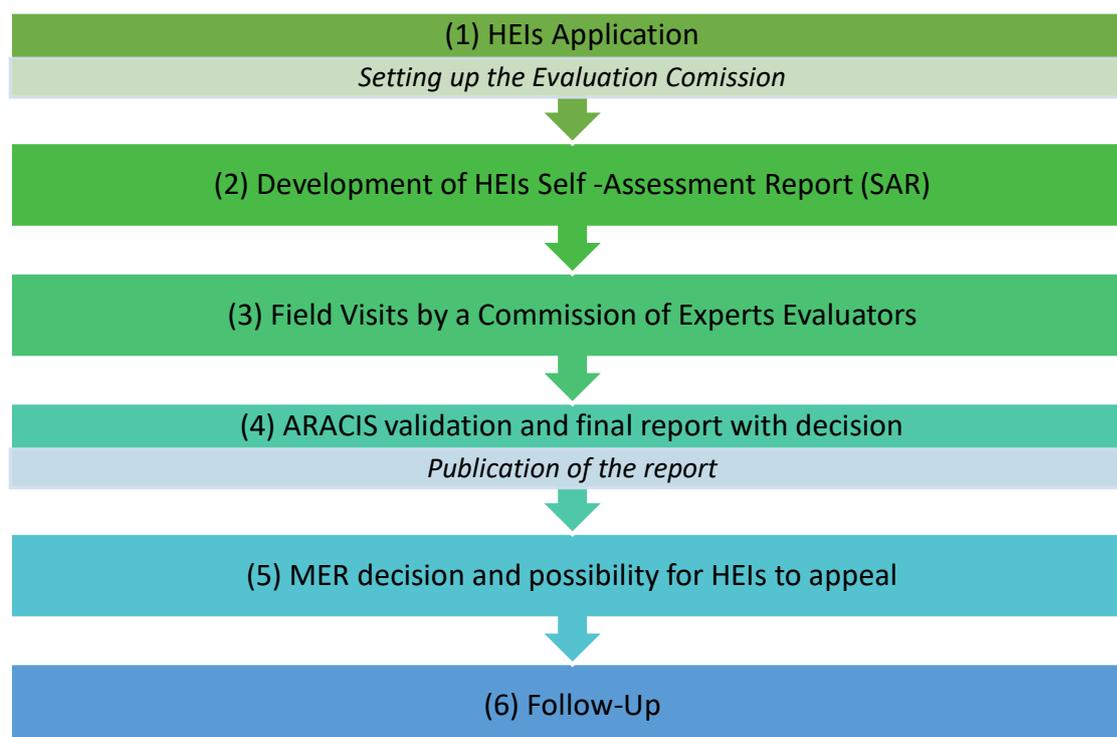
The Audits then will be carried out every 7 or 5 years, if the outcome is successful, and in between, ARACIS will conduct at least one follow-up based on documentation checks. In addition, ARACIS can randomly select institutions under the Audit system to assess a given number of study programs for follow-ups across the system.

Regarding **Joint Programs**, the proposal is to adopt the European Framework. The standards are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA without applying additional national criteria. These have been developed to facilitate an integrated approach to quality assurance of Joint Programs that genuinely reflect their joint character. According to the European Framework, these standards should be applied depending on the cooperating HEI's needs and the national framework requirements.

The evaluation process includes several important components detailed in Figure 7 below.

⁴ According to Law no. 87/2006 temporary authorization and accreditation are two-phases of the same process of accreditation.

Figure 7. Components of the evaluation process



4.1 HEIs Application and the Evaluation Commissions

HEI's Application. The internal procedure of ARACIS provides for several necessary steps before the actual evaluation process begins:

- *HEI* applies to ARACIS requesting the evaluation; in the case of new BA study programs authorization and new MA study programs accreditation, HEI should also present the National Authority for Qualifications' opportunity agreement.
- The application is notified to the Department of External Quality Assessment or the Accreditation Department, depending on the assessment subject.
- An evaluation Protocol is signed between ARACIS and HEI, specifying the type of evaluation and the programs to be evaluated; annexed is the mission's timetable.
- The Protocol is discussed and validated in the ARACIS Board Meeting. Only now can the evaluation contract between the Agency and HEI be signed, and HEI can pay the evaluation fee.

Evaluation Commission. A Commission of Expert Evaluators is set up for each evaluation mission. The Agency determines the size of the Commission in accordance with the evaluation procedure, and the size and complexity of the activity of the evaluated HEI. The ARACIS Council establishes the mission coordinator, who is usually a member of the Council, and the technical secretary, who is an employee of ARACIS. The Evaluation Commission also includes the expert evaluators in the fields of the study programs to be evaluated, usual members of the Permanent Specialty Commissions of Experts, the coordinator of the Evaluation Commission, an expert evaluator of the Institutional

Commission, a member of the Advisory Commission, a foreign evaluator, and two student representatives.

The technical secretary informs the expert evaluators on the composition of the Evaluation Commission. After receiving their approval, the secretary sends a document to establish the dates of the evaluation visit, makes the HEI's self-assessment report available to all members of the Commission, prepares the documents regarding the logistics of the evaluation visit, and follows the signing of the contracts by the experts. Each expert evaluator concludes a contract with ARACIS for the evaluation activity.

4.2 Institutions' Self-Assessment Reports (SARs)

The SAR is prepared by the HEI requesting a QA evaluation to ARACIS and is structured in line with the dimensions, criteria, standards, and indicators set out in the most up-to-date methodology for the object under evaluation.

The SAR preparation offers HEIs the opportunity to use their IQA systems to involve relevant stakeholders' groups, identify progress made in relation to previous relevant QA evaluations, and define possible areas of improvement for the future. HEIs may include additional information and data beyond that requested to show performance with the standards and indicators set out in the methodology.

4.3 Evaluation Visits

As previously mentioned, upon reception of the HEI's application and the signed contract between ARACIS and the HEI, ARACIS appoints the Commission of Experts Evaluators.

The Commission of Expert Evaluators conducts a Field Visit to the HEI. The first objective is to verify the correspondence between the data provided in the SAR and the institutional reality and additional stakeholders' views. The second objective is to complete data that may be missing or incomplete to the standards and indicators corresponding to the QA evaluation. In these activities, the Commission of Expert Evaluators observes the level of achievement for a given object of evaluation compared with the relevant standard and indicators.

To conduct this verification, complete data gathering, and assess performance, the Commission of Expert Evaluators will use visit sheets.

The Field Visits last between 3 and 4 days, depending on the availability of different stakeholders to meet and on the needed travel arrangements, and must include the following activities:

- A first meeting with the management of the HEI and management units relative to the object under evaluation (Department, Faculty, etc.) to present the plan of work for the duration of the visit.
- A meeting with the teaching staff conducting didactic and support activities for the programs under evaluation.
- A meeting with a group of students, including students representing student organizations.

- A meeting with a group of representatives of the employers from the economic sector in which graduates from the programs or HEI under evaluation typically work.
- A meeting with graduates of the HEI, programs, or study field under evaluation.
- A visit to the HEI and relevant QA units, departments, faculties, or other facilities.
- A working meeting with management staff to revise samples of students' work (such as exams, final projects, etc.) and registers to observe learning outcomes for the programs and study fields under evaluation.
- A final meeting with the HEI and management units relative to the object under evaluation (Department, Faculty, etc.) to present a summary of the key observation made by the Commission of Experts Evaluators on which their report will be based.

The total duration of the Field Visit stage from ARACIS reception of the SAR until the end of the Field Visit should not exceed a total of 3 months.

The Commission of Experts Evaluators produces an Experts Evaluators' Report, which includes a suggested evaluation outcome.

4.4 Evaluation Reports

The outcomes of the Commission of Experts' Field Visit are documented in the Evaluators' Report. This document will be signed by all team members and by the HEI representatives and managers of the units related to the QA evaluation conducted.

The individual evaluation sheets produced by each member of the Commission of Experts Evaluators are presented alongside the Evaluators' Report. Thus, the different views are considered beyond the agreed overall content of the Experts' Report. These can be considered during ARACIS internal processes of validation and preparation of the Final Report. Possible varieties of views ensure that the most objective perspective can be obtained when considering the QA evaluation's final result.

The Expert Evaluators' Reports present the results of the observations made during the field visits. These include the full assessment of the object evaluated based on the corresponding criteria, standards, and indicators. The results obtained for each set of criteria, according to the Commission of Experts Evaluators, as well as their qualitative observations, comments, and recommendations regarding the outcome of the QA evaluation are included in this Report.

The Commission of Experts Evaluators has a month after finalizing the Field Visit to prepare the Report and submit it to the corresponding Department in ARACIS.

4.5 Decisions of the Council

The relevant Department in ARACIS receives the Experts Evaluators' Report, along with the experts evaluators' individual evaluation sheets, and validates it and prepares a draft final report with a suggested outcome and a proposed follow-up plan.

The ARACIS Council receives the Permanent Specialty Commission's draft final report and follow-up plan for review and shares with HEIs to dialogue and obtains feedback. The Council prepares a Final Report with a decision and a final follow-up plan.

ARACIS Department's validation

The validation of the Experts Evaluators' Report from their Field Visit consists of revising the grades and comments against the most up-to-date corresponding QA evaluations Guideline's criteria, indicators, and reference standards.

This process aims to discuss and agree within ARACIS on the contents of the draft reports and plans to be submitted to HEI and the MoER. Thus, ARACIS's Department of Accreditations or Periodical Evaluation, as it corresponds, meets to discuss these drafts and find consensual views on the evaluation results and critical feedback for the HEIs and the recommendation for the MoER on whether to keep or discontinue the accreditation. This process includes discussions with the Commission of Experts Evaluators, if necessary, to complete data or clarifications.

The Department drafts a report and a draft follow-up plan passed to the ARACIS Council for their consideration and approval. ARACIS sends the final report to the HEI and the MoER for a final decision to be officially approved. The follow-up plan is shared only with the HEIs.

ARACIS Council's Final Report and decision, with Follow-up Plan

Upon receiving the draft report and follow-up plans, the ARACIS Council contacts the HEI to complete or clarify information and discuss the outcome. In turn, the university may require obtaining additional information about the report and contribute to developing the follow-up plans.

As the last step, the ARACIS Council prepares and approves the Final Report and Follow-up Plans. The final report is submitted to the MoER and is published on the ARACIS website. Besides, a follow-up plan is shared with HEI only.

4.6 Appeals

The MoER, based on the report and recommendations of ARACIS, grants, denies, or withdraws the right of the HEI or the study program(s) to operate.

However, HEIs can appeal the outcome of the QA evaluation carried out by ARACIS⁵. They must send a letter to the ARACIS Council explaining the reasons for the appeal within two weeks after the publication of the report on the ARACIS website.

The general steps of the Appeal Procedure are as follows:

- HEI sends a letter to ARACIS, appealing the outcome of the QA evaluation.

⁵ ARACIS, 2019, Procedure on the submission and resolution of complains, and the appeals lodged by higher education institutions.

- Not later than 30 days since receipt of the appeal, the ARACIS Council’s Executive Board reviews the report, invites the university rector and the contact person to discuss clarification.
 - If, after discussion, the university representatives agree that the QA report is based on documented evidence, the appeal may be withdrawn in writing, and the Agency’s External institutional evaluation report published on the website shall be deemed approved in its original form.
 - If instead, after this discussion, the university representatives maintain their appeal or do not wish to participate in the debate, the appeal is settled.
- The ARACIS Council appoints a specialty inspector, following the guidelines included in the Appeals Procedure, to make a preliminary analysis of the request considering it with the QA evaluation final report and the supporting documents submitted by the HEI during the QA evaluation and in their appeal.
- The specialty inspector produces a report that is submitted to the ARACIS Council’s Executive Board.
- The ARACIS Council’s Executive Board examines the specialty inspector’s report and either rejects the request or proceed to an Appeal Settlement Commission appointment, following the guidelines included in the Appeal Procedure, to proceed further with the request.
- The Appeal Settlement Commissions and method of settlement of the appeal vary depending on the type of appeal being made – either related to procedural flows, claiming the breach of the provisions contained in this methodology or the guides based on it, or to issues of ethics, claiming the violation of the Code of Professional Ethics.
- Suppose the Commission finds that the reported procedural flows or ethical issues are real. In that case, it will propose to the Council to resume the QA evaluation to correct the issues raised without the university having to bear further evaluation costs covered by the Agency.
- The ARACIS Council examines the proposals received from the procedures previously specified and approves them by secret ballot.
- Within a maximum of five working days from the date of the Council’s meeting that approved the appeal settlement results, the Agency publishes on its website the appeal’s content and a notice on the settlement result and how it was resolved.

4.7 Follow-up Activities

In all cases, ARACIS produces alongside the Final Report a Follow-up Plan based on the recommendations made in that report. The purpose of this Plan is to set the basis for continued dialogue with the HEI and the responsible for QA at different levels of the HEI. The Plan's design will emerge from the discussions held with the HEI during the final phases of preparing the final report. Actions in which ARACIS and the HEI act together to implement the plan can be included.

The Plan is presented to the HEI at the same time the final report is published. The Follow-up plans are shared only with the HEI and those involved in the corresponding QA evaluation.

ARACIS makes itself available to meet with the HEI to present the Final Report and the Follow-up Plan. When ARACIS communicates to the HEI that the Report is published in their websites, it will also make itself available to the HEI's responsible for QA to meet and present the QA evaluation results and the Follow-up Plans at theirs or the HEIs premises.

If the QA outcome is negative, and the recommendations advise for a supplemental period, the Follow-up Plan consists of a Revision Plan. This plan should include specific provisions and deadlines. ARACIS is made available to the HEI for continuous support and consultation during this Revision Plan implementation.

In all cases, a routine follow-up visit takes place after two years of the QA evaluation. These are short visits where a selection of the ARACIS experts or Commission of Experts Evaluators related to the given QA evaluation will meet with IQA or HEI relevant representatives. In this meeting, ARACIS and the HEI discuss progress and obstacles encountered in implementing the Follow-up Plan.

ARACIS can also provide ad hoc consultancies in-between QA evaluations to explore further with the HEI how to achieve the objectives set in the Follow-up Plans or develop new areas or improvements. These services are separate from the different types of QA evaluations that ARACIS offers. The format and aims are agreed upon in discussions with the HEI.

V. Communication

Communications is an essential strategic tool for achieving the Agency's mission, values, vision, and objectives. ARACIS should develop a communication policy and procedure to optimize communication both within the Agency and externally, enhance its visibility and missions, and make available information and documentation to ensure shared and common knowledge to all employees and stakeholders.

In connection with the Quality Policy, the Communication Policy and Procedure aims to provide a methodology for carrying out communication activities. The scope of the procedure extends to all stakeholders of the Agency, including experts.

The Communication Officer is responsible for defining the communication principles and managing joint actions (ARACIS internal and external communication tools, accompanying documents, etc.).

5.1 Communication Policy and Procedure

The purpose of the Communication Policy and Procedure is to implement ARACIS internal and external communication, and identify expectations, collect basic information, determine targets, develop content, and disseminate messages on ad hoc supports. It describes how the Agency defines its communication policy and selects the various means of communication with partners and stakeholders.

Communication is, above all, an action of information shared between people having common interests. The effectiveness of results depends mainly on *the quality of communication*. Effective sharing of information promotes everyone's understanding of the Agency's policy and objectives, giving the staff a strong sense of belonging and increasing staff motivation.

Training sessions adapted to each organization level and appropriate roles, positions, and tasks are recommended to acquire communication practice. The communication process must also consider the analysis of the information collected and the measurement of the communication effectiveness. Information "back from the visit" must also be formally analyzed, being a part of the communication process that will lead to improvement actions visible to all staff.

Feedback is a critical component of the communication process. ARACIS should implement a system for collecting and analyzing opinions, critics, suggestions on methodologies, procedures, indicators, guidelines, etc. provided by HEIs, evaluators, partners, and other stakeholders and its staff members.

Communication is a strong vector of progress in motivation, participation, ownership, belonging to the group, and accountability. It is a process that relies on the behavior and receptivity of people, favoring the participation of all, group work, motivation, exchange of ideas, innovation, empowerment of individuals, appropriation of values and ambitions of the Agency.

This process must be carefully implemented, recognized, valued, and improved by all ARACIS staff and experts. It will provide information and documentation to ensure shared knowledge among all employees:

- In a non-exhaustive way, the administrative staff mainly handles the informing modalities on the performed evaluations, the follow-up of the files and the encoding in the database,

various supports towards HEIs, the transmission of documents, the management mail, purchase orders, deliberations, appeals, etc.

- Internal communication deals with **Intranet management**.
- External communication deals with events, updating the website, and other means of communication.

5.2 External Communication

Continuously improving communication with stakeholders, especially with HEIs, is a priority of ARACIS's activity. ARACIS website is a useful instrument and a public communication channel that the Agency uses to make information available more quickly to a broader audience.

Most importantly, ARACIS publishes on its website all significant results of the evaluation process, such as validation and evaluation reports endorsed by the Council. Internet search engines should index all these reports.

ARACIS also publishes working documents, methodologies, criteria, guidelines, overall higher education system and thematic analyzes (for instance, the "Quality Barometer"), and brochures relevant to stakeholders, as well as annual reports on its activity, including a self-assessment report. These documents are published in the Romanian language. ARACIS manages to translate the most important documents in English and publish both versions on its website.

ARACIS publishes and disseminates the "Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education" (QAR). This academic journal focuses on QA in higher education, aiming to transfer and share good practices, support communication between internal and external experts, and contribute to developing a quality assurance culture. ARACIS distributes the journal to all HEIs.

All ARACIS important news and press releases are also published under the [News](#) section of the ARACIS website.

5.3 Internal Communication

The communication within the Agency is upward, downward, and transversal, considering employees' views and encouraging their participation in this communication. Internal communication is not under the responsibility of one service (Communication, Public Relations, or Human Resources) or one person; internal communication is everyone's business. Internal communication includes internal newsletters, meetings, dashboards, etc.

This is done through:

- Periodical QA meetings – to analyze quality points and submit them to the relevant actors to collect their proposals and organize their participation in implementing the corrective actions.
- Annual and quarterly meetings – to define and monitor the objectives.
- Quarterly coaching meetings – to share background information and needs for each type of evaluation.

- Weekly meetings of the Executive Board – primarily to get feedback, as well as information and directives from the ARACIS Council.
- Annual individual interviews.
- Internal communication tools.

It is essential for staff to feel a sense of belonging to the Agency to make their best contribution possible. Therefore, employees need to express themselves and must be informed. ARACIS should manage communications with employees, informing them on developments of the Agency, facilitating change management, and coping with crises.

The staff should be encouraged to express their views and ideas to increase productivity and quality results, reduce time-consuming activities in the operation process, or improve processes. Technology-enabled communication should create incentives to look at staff views and involve them in solving organizational problems.

Internal communication is vital to minimize resistance to change of an established system, while external communication is essential to curb stakeholder's opposition to the implementation of change. This is addressed by organizing regular meetings between management and senior executives of ARACIS to review and analyze challenges and the implementation progress of activities. In turn, senior executives hold regular meetings within departments they manage.

The communication policy is the necessary foundation in this respect. There are values and rules of conduct concerning staff relations, including transparency and the need for dialogue. This policy is widely published. It should also guide the development of the communication plan. A guide to developing a communication plan is attached as Annex.

Annex. Building a Communication Plan

Step 1. Analyzing the situation

- Making sure the informational needs of the Agency and the context (framework and limits) in which they fit are well-known.
- Briefly analyzing and evaluating the communication tools used (internal newspaper, bulletin, bulletin board, meetings, etc.). This analysis should cover the content (variety, usefulness), periodicity, target publics, listening or participation, and exchange level (one-way dissemination, real dialogue, etc.).
- Evaluating the genuine willingness of the ARACIS Council to communicate with the staff. General communication policy is useful; however, it is necessary to answer the following questions precisely:
 - What do we want to pass on to the staff?
 - What level of detail is one willing to convey to each of the hierarchical levels?
 - How far is ARACIS Council willing to share critical information with staff?

Step 2. Choosing the tools

Once the needs are known, we can begin to look at how to answer them.

- Making sure that the problem is real. It is often not so much the communication tools lacking, as the willingness to listen to the immediate superior. This is the most credible source of information. Therefore, it must be the first means of communication, one that must always be used before launching the Agency in the production of expensive communication tools (video, brochure, intranet, etc.).
- Are the Agency's executives communicating the information to the staff? It is one thing to explain a partnership agreement or to share administrative or operational information; it is another thing to listen to employees, answer their questions about the organization's future, and receive their hopes and worries. Basic communication training should be considered.
- Considering that Agency staff do not form a uniform group in which all individuals share the same perceptions. Their experience, seniority, position, and responsibilities are all factors that will influence their perceptions.

The choice of the means to use, be it the intervention of frames or the production of a tool, is almost as important as the information's content. In communication, each means has its advantages and its limits. The following table gives a brief overview of situations that may arise in communication and means to use.

The choice of the means to use, either the intervention framework or the production of a tool, is almost as important as the information's content. However, each means of communication has advantages and limits. The following table gives a brief overview of situations that may arise in communication and means to use.

Communication means to choose according to the situation

Situation	Means	Results
The information to be broadcast is simple to understand and without emotional content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Memorandum, Fact Sheet, Newsletter - Bulletin Board - Messages on computer screens, etc.. 	Economy and efficiency
Information is complex and raises questions or causes reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual interviews - Meetings (with or without supporting documents: leaflets, structured presentation, etc.) 	Reactions of known and immediately treated staff

Step 3. Elaborating the communication plan

The communication plan often takes the form of a table answering the questions: That? What? When? How much? It specifies communication objectives, the contents to be delivered or to receive, the target publics, and the means to be taken. The plan must also include a communication program that details activities: leaders, timelines, etc.

The plan also specifies responsibilities, identifies the stages of execution, facilitates the follow-up of the activities, and indicates the sums to be committed.

Step 4. Sharing responsibilities

The internal communication plan and program specify responsibilities. Communication is not under the obligation of one service (Communication, Public Relations, or Human Resources) or one person. Internal communication is everyone's business.

Step 5. Exchanging with the people

It is essential for staff to feel a sense of belonging to the business and make the best contribution possible. Therefore, they need to express themselves, and they must be informed. ARACIS must manage its communications with its employees on developing the Agency, facilitating change management (quality, reengineering, IT, etc.) or coping with crises. The communication policy is the necessary foundation in this respect. There are values and rules of conduct concerning staff relations, including transparency and the need for dialogue. This policy needs to be widely published. It should also guide the development of the communication plan.

Competence makes a difference!

Project selected under the Administrative Capacity Operational Programme, co-financed by the European Union from the European Social Fund