



*Approved in the ARACIS Council meeting of .....2021*

## **Guidelines on conducting external evaluation of doctoral studies in a blended format**

**Scope:** accreditation or periodic evaluation procedures of doctoral university studies 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 periodic external evaluation or accreditation procedures of doctoral studies are as described in the article 158 para (4) of the Law of National Education no. 1/2011, with subsequent amendments and additions; the Government's Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on quality assurance in education, approved by Law no. 87/2006, as subsequently amended and supplemented; the Ministerial Order no. 3200/2020 on the Methodology for the evaluation of doctoral university studies and the systems of criteria, standards and performance indicators used in the evaluation and the Guides on conducting the periodic external evaluation process of doctoral schools and doctoral study domains, developed by ARACIS.

The process of periodic external evaluation or accreditation of doctoral studies, as the case, involves the following steps:

- a) within the external evaluation of the Institution Organising Doctoral University Studies (IOSUD), evaluation of the organisational component called a doctoral school, organised within the IOSUD;
- b) evaluation of the doctoral university study domains in which the doctoral university study programs are organised.

Within the epidemiological context created by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, the external evaluation procedures of the doctoral studies may 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 experts Panels, the meetings with various stakeholders and, eventually, online visits to some 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. In the 2021 – 2022 academic year the doctoral studies evaluation process will be conducted, as much as possible, concomitantly with the institutional evaluation of a higher education institution which is also IOSUD. The education provider also submits to ARACIS the periodic external evaluation request for all accredited doctoral schools and for each doctoral study domain which are organised by IOSUD.

2. Following the verification carried out by the Service of Experts and Specialized Inspectors in Accreditation and Quality Assurance, the ARACIS Executive Board shall validate that the conditions necessary to start the evaluation process have been met and shall decide to initiate the external evaluation procedure, by communicating this in writing to the education provider and by sending the evaluation contract for signature.

3. No later than 90 days after signing the evaluation contract, the education provider shall submit to ARACIS, in electronic format, the Internal Evaluation Reports for each of the accredited doctoral schools and the Internal Evaluation Reports of the doctoral study domains which they organise, drawn up in both Romanian and English, accompanied by their Annexes, drawn up in Romanian or English.

The Internal Evaluation Reports for doctoral studies submitted at 15.02.2019 remain valid and shall be taken into account for the evaluation process. These reports will be updated with minimum 30 days before the date of the evaluation visit.

4. The Evaluation Contract can be concluded, the evaluation fee can be paid, and the Internal Evaluation Report, as well as its pertaining annexes can be received using the asynchronous online working procedures through ARACIS cloud. To this purpose, the Public Relations, Registry, Archive, Secretariat Service and the External Quality Evaluation Department shall keep in touch with the contact person appointed by the requesting higher education institution.

5. The Accreditation Department, on proposals from the Permanent Specialty Commission in charge of the doctoral study domains, appoints the Experts Panel charged with evaluating the doctoral study domains.

The External Quality Evaluation Department appoints the Experts Panel charged with evaluating the doctoral school and the requesting institution – IOSUD.

The ARACIS Executive Board, on proposals from the External Quality Evaluation Department, appoints the mission director – a member of the ARACIS Council, the coordinator of the Experts Panel at the IOSUD level and the technical secretary of the evaluation commission.

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 mission director 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 Experts Panel 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 mission director and the coordinator of the Experts Panel at the IOSUD level 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 Experts Panels at doctoral domains and doctoral schools, the coordinator of the Experts Panel at the IOSUD level 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 summary Report drawn up after the evaluation visit at IOSUD level.

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 doctoral study domains or to doctoral schools' level may be different from the period of the visit at institutional level – IOSUD. Thus, the doctoral study domains, the doctoral schools and the institutional - IOSUD evaluation activity of the expert evaluators may be independent within the 5 to 7-day evaluation period established. It is advisable that, in the case of the existence of a single doctoral study domain in a doctoral school, the external evaluation shall be realised with a single extended Experts Panel and the visit shall take place concomitantly for the two evaluations.

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 Experts Panels 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 Experts Panels to complete the evaluation 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 level – IOSUD from the documentation pertaining to each doctoral study domain, respectively to each doctoral school. All the members of the Experts Panels 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 Experts Panel.

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

12. To prepare and harmonise the evaluation stages in the blended format for the institutional evaluation – IOSUD and the doctoral study domains, respectively the doctoral schools' evaluation, the mission director, 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 doctoral studies Experts Panels. 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 - IOSUD, as well as those related to the doctoral domains, respectively doctoral schools' evaluation.

13. The Experts Panels for the evaluation of the doctoral study domains and the doctoral schools 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 Guides on conducting the periodic external evaluation of the doctoral study domains and of the doctoral schools. They shall also consider the recommendations on conducting the evaluations in a blended procedure format provided in the Guidelines for evaluation of higher education study programmes / domains in a blended procedure format.

To reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus through direct contact, the visits at the evaluated institution will be scheduled to last one day, and may be extended in well documented circumstances with the approval of the ARACIS Executive Board. The visits of the teaching and research spaces, the laboratories and the demonstration of working mode for some equipment and software products which are relevant for the research process, the institution library, the secretariats etc. shall be realised, as much as possible, in a face-to-face format.

In these situations when, from different reasons, the members of the Experts Panel have no access, in the period of the evaluation visit, at the above-mentioned spaces and structures, they will request a short live video presentation of these spaces and structures and the organisation of interviews with the representatives of these structures, using synchronous visual communication means.

14. During the face-to-face evaluation visit, as well as before and after the visit, the members of the Experts Panels shall have sessions for documentation, review of additional documents, filling of the External Evaluation Report, discussions and information exchange etc. which shall be conducted remotely via synchronous or asynchronous communication means, organised by the coordinator of each Experts Panel, with the support from the ARACIS IT Compartment.

15. When the evaluation mission is completed, the Experts Panels for the doctoral study domains and the doctoral schools will draw up and submit to ARACIS an external evaluation Report containing the findings made following the evaluation process on the fulfillment of the system of criteria, standards and performance indicators in which there are also integrated the findings, the conclusions of the international expert, as well as recommendations for improving the work of that doctoral study domain.



The reports of the Experts Panels shall be accompanied by the recordings of the interviews and discussions held during the remote evaluation.

16. Based on the documents uploaded by the university in the virtual classroom, the members of the Experts Panels at institutional level - IOSUD shall fill in the evaluation Report and identify the objectives that need to be reviewed during the visit at the requesting institution. As a rule, the mission director and the coordinator of the Experts Panel 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 Expert Panel at IOSUD level may request face-to-face working meetings, which shall be attended by the management of the institution, the teaching staff, the employers, the students or other relevant actors, such as the staff of the quality assurance departments of the institution.

In that case when the doctoral studies evaluation is made within the periodic institutional evaluation, the summary report will be a separate chapter of the institutional evaluation report and shall include specific recommendations, which may influence the decision to comply/not-comply with the quality standards.

17. The doctoral students-expert evaluators, members of the National Register of Student Evaluators (RNE-S) shall conduct their activity as member of the Experts Panel, in line with the schedule established with the representatives of the evaluated institution and will participate in drawing up of the external evaluation Report.

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.

18. The evaluation activity of the international expert evaluator shall be conducted remotely, using synchronous or asynchronous communication means. The secretaries designated at doctoral study domains level, the secretary of the External Quality Evaluation Department or the technical secretary of the Experts Panel at institutional level – IOSUD, shall inform the international expert evaluator about the procedure and the detailed schedule of the evaluation mission. In conducting the evaluation activity, the international expert shall receive the internal evaluation Report and its annexes in English, for review.

The international expert evaluator may request interviews with members of the management team of the university or of the departments which coordinate doctoral study programs 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 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 Experts Panels; such sessions shall be conducted remotely using synchronous and/or asynchronous communication means, and shall be organised by the mission director and the coordinator of the Experts Panel, 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 to ARACIS, in digital format, the international expert's evaluation Report for doctoral domains, doctoral schools or institutional-IOSUD level, as the case.

19. During the evaluation visit, as well as before and after the visit, the members of the Experts Panels shall have sessions for documentation, review of additional documents, filling of the External Evaluation Report, discussions and information exchange, discussion with students of the evaluated institution, employers, graduates etc. which shall be conducted remotely via synchronous or asynchronous communication means. These activities are organised by the coordinator of the Experts Panel, assisted by the appointed secretary and with the support from the ARACIS IT Compartment.

19<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the evaluation, the mission director and the coordinators of the Experts Panels 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<sup>2</sup>. 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.

20. The reports of the members of the Experts Panels shall be accompanied by the recordings of the interviews and discussions held during the remote evaluation.

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

21. In the case of the evaluation of doctoral study domains, the external evaluation report and the international expert's report shall be forwarded to ARACIS at the Permanent Specialty Commission in charge of the doctoral study domain under review, in view of verifying and completing, where appropriate, these reports. The reports validated by the Commission will be submitted by ARACIS to the IOSUD for informing and in view of formulating observations regarding eventual material errors. Based on the answer received from the evaluated institution, the Permanent Specialty Commission shall finalise the evaluation report and shall submit it for the ARACIS Council analysis which will take a final decision for the doctoral study domain under review.

22. In the case of the evaluation of doctoral schools, the Experts Panel of each doctoral school shall draw up and send to ARACIS an external evaluation report containing the findings made following the evaluation process, as well as recommendations for improving the future work of that doctoral school in which will also be integrated the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the international expert. External evaluation reports of doctoral schools and of the international experts shall be centralized at the IOSUD level Committee which shall



verify these reports and will draw up a summary of the external evaluation reports of doctoral schools.

The mission director shall transmit the summary report at the IOSUD level and the external evaluation reports of all doctoral schools to the ARACIS External Quality Evaluation Department, for verifying and submitting to the IOSUD under review. The IOSUD Experts Committee will integrate the evaluated institution's response in the external evaluation report and submit its final form to the ARACIS Department of External Evaluation. The Department will analyse the final report and propose a decision to the ARACIS Council for each doctoral school.