

Analysis of the needs for change at ARACIS

based on the *Guide for Effective Stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance*

INTRODUCTION

The present document is elaborated within The Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities (ESQA) project (607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3-BOLOGNA), co-financed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, within the ERASMUS+ Programme. The project runs for a period of 2 years and is coordinated by the Romanian Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ARACIS, as well as with European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), European Students' Union (ESU), the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher education (HCERES) - France, National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) - Bulgaria, The Danish Accreditation Institution (DAI), National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC) - Republic of Moldova

The analysis is based on the *Guide for effective involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance* providing guidelines and practice-based guidance, primarily to the QA agencies and national authorities in the EHEA, to strengthen dialogue and co-operation with stakeholders, as well as for their effective involvement in QA processes.

Previously, based on a self-assessment exercise related to stakeholders (SH) involvement in its activities, ARACIS participated to peer review activities, to identify the strenght and weak areas related to the their involvement. The peer-review activities included a workshop organized at Bucharest in 2019, with participation of different categories of stakeholders, as well as the national authority for higher education HE. An online peer-learning activity was also organized, based on the *Guideline*, with the participation of QA agencies and higher education authorities from EHEA countries.

The document was elaborated by ARACIS members in ESQA team, and peer-reviewed by EURASHE and ENQA.

1. AGENCY'S MAIN QA ACTIVITIES WITH STAKEHOLDERS' INVOLVEMENT

QA activity	Stakeholder groups involved in the activity	Formal or informal?	Frequency (how often?)
Periodic consultations	National HE authority, National Rectors' Council, Students' unions, Teachers' unions, the Romanian Agency for Quality assurance in Pre-university Education - ARACIP.	Formal	Usually 4-6 times /year
Participation in the governing body of the agency	Teachers' unions, students' unions, employers	Formal	Meetings once/month, but the activity is permanent
Development and revision of QA standards and processes	National Rectors' Council, teachers' unions, students' unions, national HE authority.	Formal	Each time a new procedure is developed
External evaluations for institutional, study programmes and masters' domains evaluations	Students' unions	Formal	Every panel
Evaluation of engineering study programmes requesting EUR ACE Label	Representatives of employers as panel members	Formal	At the request of the university
Participation in the Permanent Commissions on fields of studies	Students' unions – all commissions, employers – only in the Engineering Commissions	Formal	Meetings once/month, but the activity is permanent
Ethics Commission	Students' unions, teachers' unions	Formal	When needed

2. ANALYSIS of NEEDS OF CHANGE AND PROPOSED ACTIONS

Theme		Current status and needs analysis	Action required
Theme 1: Sharing underlying concepts of quality in HE and QA systems	The underlying concepts of quality and quality assurance system, as embedded in the higher education system, should be shared and co-created by involving relevant stakeholders. This way a commitment is built which is embedded in a quality culture that is based on trust and mutual understanding. Relevant stakeholder categories are all those that reflect the opinions present in the wider society linked to the quality of higher education.	The concepts of QA and QA system are not widely shared at the level of the higher education system. Further steps should be taken to build the quality culture. In what it concerns the society at large, the role of QA and ARACIS is generally not sufficiently known.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Enhance public communication related to QA and ARACIS role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Periodical press releases - Presence in social media (FB) - Organize workshops with the participation of different categories of SHs. ✓ Permanent dialogue to be organised with the <u>Consultative Commission</u>.¹ ✓ Organise periodic consultations with a broader range of stakeholders to learn about their expectations and opinions, raise their interest in higher education and quality assurance, explain the main concepts related to quality assurance in higher education.
Theme 2: Diversity of categories of stakeholders and their different roles, especially in consultations	All identified and relevant stakeholders that have an interest in the quality of higher education should be systematically involved, especially when (re)designing a QA system. This may lead to more openness, transparency, and	When (re)designing the Methodology for evaluating QA in the HE system, relevant stakeholders are consulted on a permanent basis: Ministry of Education, National Rectors' Council; Students' unions; Teachers' unions; National Authority for Qualifications (ANC). Concerning the evaluation of doctoral study programs a working group with the participation of representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Establish a framework for the continuous consultation with the main categories of stakeholders, through meetings or working groups/committees, that would allow co-creation of QA procedures. ✓ Set a working group, with the participation of the National Authority

¹ **The Consultative Commission** represents the interests of higher education institutions, enhancing mutual collaboration, aiming to develop and implement adequate evaluation and QA activities, thus meeting the needs of universities in quality assurance. The members of the commission assist the institutional evaluation panels in the quality assurance activity, to offer an objective and transparent opinion on the process and are included in the commissions solving the appeals of higher education institutions.

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	effective stakeholder involvement based on co-ownership.	of Council of Rectors, students' federations and teaching staff unions was set. Relevant stakeholders should be involved in the early stages when a new procedure is developed, in order to build co-ownership.	for Qualifications (ANC) and the Ministry of Education, related to the development of a methodology for learning outcomes.
Theme 3: Objectives of stakeholders' involvement	Be transparent and explicit in collectively sharing the different objectives of the involvement of stakeholder categories in order to raise the effectiveness of their involvement. As stakeholders are not a single, homogenous group, dealing with them requires a diversified approach; this may imply that their involvement is 'unequal' and happens at different stages.	Requirements related to the involvement of stakeholders in QA are established by the law or within ARACIS methodologies and guides. No analysis was produced related to the specific objectives of stakeholders' involvement at different levels, within evaluation procedures or decision bodies of the agency, or to the stakeholders' expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Draw a list of the agency objectives for engaging different categories of stakeholders in evaluation activities and within the governing bodies of the agency. ✓ Prepare stakeholder category - tailored presentations of the objectives, in view of approaching the diverse categories in clear and attractive manner, with reference to their role and involvement in external QA. ✓ Develop and run a survey to investigate the expectations of different categories of stakeholders in what it concerns their role in QA procedures.
Theme 4: Recruitment/ Selection of stakeholders' representatives	The selection methods should be clear, publicly known and used consistently by the agency and all stakeholders, including the national authorities. The recruitment methods may vary among the stakeholder groups. While nomination by the stakeholder's organization is a sign of greater trust and independence, selection by the agency based on clear criteria can help find a better	The selection procedures and criteria for recruitment of stakeholders are regulated for students, teachers' union and employers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Revision of the selection criteria through consultation with the respective categories of SHs. A selection criterion should be related to the person's individual commitment. ✓ Preparatory meetings should best be held with the nominating stakeholder organizations to clarify roles and expectations of the future representatives. Stakeholder category - tailored presentations (as per Theme 3) should be used as starting points of the

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	<p>candidate as far as vision, knowledge, experience and commitment are concerned. A combination of both has better chances of selecting more engaged stakeholders. Preparatory meetings should best be held with the nominating stakeholder organizations in order to clarify roles and expectations of the future representatives.</p>		<p>discussions. Explaining their role and defining together their way(s) of involvement.</p>
Theme 5: Training of stakeholders	<p>Well-prepared knowledge transfer about higher education and quality assurance should be organised in order to raise the commitment of stakeholders in the governance and work of the QA agency. Trainings for review panel members should be obligatory for admission to pools of new experts as well as before actual evaluations. The trainings should be informative and develop the trainees' review skills in practice. Briefings must be held before any review.</p>	<p>ARACIS is organizing dedicated training sessions, for the following types of experts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students, - Employers, - Representatives of HE institutions. <p>The sessions for students are including hands-on sessions and are interactive. The acquired competences are evaluated at the end of the session.</p> <p>The sessions for employers and HEI representatives are not interactive enough and no evaluation procedures of acquired competences are foreseen. The trainings are often organized on the spot, there is no core curriculum and content established, that could be delivered systematically.</p> <p>Opportunities related to online trainings were used in order to increase the number of meetings / training sessions with HEI representatives, and should be used in the future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The content and format of training should be further revised, in order to allow more interactivity and hands-on sessions. ✓ Common training sessions, involving all kinds of stakeholders and the experts' evaluators should be organized, in order to enhance the cohesion of evaluation panels, and the understanding of each other's role. ✓ A core curriculum for training should be developed, eventually recognised as a postgraduate course, so that certificates could be issued.

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Theme 6: Involvement of stakeholders in reviews	<p>Review panels should contain all perspectives of the institution, programme and/or topics under review. If the subjects are the QA processes and the output of a HEI or study programme, the perspectives are those of learners (students), teachers (academic peers/experts), the leadership of the institution (senior leaders or managers), the professional field and of the future lives of the graduates (employers and/or alumni). The opinions of all review panel members should receive equal attention during the review and decision processes, irrespective of their different roles and duties.</p> <p>The international perspective is important in a review panel in the context of global higher education and certainly when the HEI or study programme has a specific international strategy and/or dimension.</p>	<p>The categories of stakeholders involved in reviews are students and representatives of employers, the latter applying only to engineering programs seeking EURACE label.</p> <p>The perspectives of teachers are taken into consideration by involvement of the experts who are academic peers. The presence of students in all evaluation panels provides their perspectives as beneficiaries of and members of higher education community. The perspective of the professional fields and future lives of graduates is limited to the involvement in the review panels of representatives of the engineering profession and to the double quality of academics in the health sciences (medicine, pharmacy), who are acting also as practitioners.</p> <p>International evaluators are panel members in institutional evaluations (of HEIs as a whole) and in the external evaluation of the third cycle of university studies which has started recently, given that research activities have an important international dimension.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The agency should pay more attention in the evaluation process to the involvement of stakeholders in the internal quality assurance procedures in HEIs. ✓ The possibility to extend involvement of employers in evaluation panels should be investigated.
Theme 7: Involvement of stakeholders in the governance and organisation of QA agencies	<p>The categories of the stakeholders and their degree of engagement are related to the mission and strategy of a QA agency as well as to the national QA system. Consequently, all relevant and identified stakeholders should be involved in</p>	<p>Students and representatives of teachers' unions and employers are involved in the governance bodies of the agency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The presence of employers' representatives should be extended to all Commissions of permanent experts. ✓ Elaborate thematic analysis on subjects of interest for different categories of stakeholders (e.g. student centred learning).

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	internal and external QA activities of the agency.		
Theme 8: Independence vis-à-vis stakeholders' involvement	The involvement of stakeholders should be organized in such a way that the independence of the QA system, the governance and activities of the agency are enhanced.	The independence and governance of the agency is stipulated by the law. No representative of the national authority is involved or could influence the decision-making process of the agency or other QA activities. The Code of ethics, declarations of confidentiality, impartiality and absence of conflicts of interests are in place. The representation of the relevant stakeholders in the governance of the agency enhances the independence of the agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Setting an advisory council involving different stakeholders' representatives should be investigated.
Theme 9: Communication and transparency towards stakeholders	Communication and transparency with all stakeholders should be considered as essential and strategic building blocks of quality assurance that functions as an effective stakeholders' model, in which there is a culture of co-creating and sharing of knowledge and practice.	Transparency is assured by publication of relevant data on the Internet page of the agency. The public communication was reinforced, by regularly press releases and presence in social media. Representatives of the agency are participating at different events related to higher education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Developing a communication strategy with stakeholders, to address the different categories, aiming to create a community of stakeholders interested in QA in HE, as well as to make largely known ARACIS current activities. ✓ Intensify public communication related to ARACIS activities.
Theme 10: Strategic approach to stakeholder engagement and supporting activities	Stakeholder involvement which is aimed at having a qualitative impact should be integrated in the agency's strategic policy, and should also be linked to other policies, such as structural development, networking, communication and the agency's own internal quality assurance.	Dialogue and involvement of stakeholders in the QA activities of ARACIS is a distinct point in the 2018 – 2021 strategy. The action plan for 2021 also contains activities related to this matter. In ARACIS organizational chart there is a position dedicated to the collaboration with stakeholders, but the position is not filled in yet. Within the Project "Improving public policies in higher education and enhancing the quality of regulations by updating quality standards" – QAFIN of the Ministry of Education, co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) through the Operational Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Inclusion in the future Strategic plan of the agency the enhanced engagement of stakeholders. ✓ Strengthen the stakeholders' involvement dedicated office of ARACIS. ✓ Organising yearly conferences, that can be subject specific, with the participation of experts and different stakeholders, to discuss and analyse data and specific studies, as well as to

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		<p>“Administrative Capacity” 2014-2020, the report “Roles, competences and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and ARACIS in the process of quality assurance” further clarifies the relations with the Ministry of Education and stimulates synergy between the two institutions.</p>	<p>propose directions for quality improvement in the field.</p> <p>✓ For each study domain, organise a yearly conference/workshop, where representatives of the permanent specialty commissions, academics and evaluators from the domain present syntheses/statistics/analyses regarding evaluation processes in the current year, make proposals for enhancing the educational process, consider feed-back from the representatives of universities.</p>