

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Implicarea stakeholderilor în asigurarea calității instituțiilor de învățământ superior: transformarea bunelor intenții în realitate

Daniela-Cristina Ghițulică, Radu-Mircea Damian

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education, Vol. 11, No. 1 – 2, 2021, pp. 82 – 116

Publicat de: Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior - ARACIS

Locul publicării: București, România

Tipul publicației: tipărit, online

ISSN: 2066 - 9119, 2069 - 2188 (online)

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Pagină electronică: <https://www.aracis.ro/numarul-curent-revista-qar/>

Revista *Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education* este editată din fondurile proprii ale ARACIS și, în această etapă, contribuie și la sustenabilitatea proiectului „Dezvoltarea și consolidarea culturii calității la nivelul sistemului de învățământ superior românesc - QUALITAS”, Contract POSDRU/155/1.2/S/141894.

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**Stakeholder Involvement in Quality Assurance of Higher Education
Institutions: Turning Wishful Thinking into Reality**

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Published by: The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ARACIS

Place of publication: Bucharest, Romania

Publication type: printed, online

ISSN: 2066 - 9119, 2069 - 2188 (online)

Address: Bd. Mărăști, no. 59, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, postal code 011464

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Web page: <https://www.aracis.ro/en/qar-magazine-current-issue/>

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education is edited from ARACIS own funds and, at this stage, also contributes to the sustainability of the project “The development and the consolidation of quality culture at Romanian higher education system – QUALITAS”, POSDRU Agreement 155/1.2/S/141894.

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Stakeholder Involvement in Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions: Turning Wishful Thinking into Reality

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Abstract: *The analysis presented in the paper aims to investigate the viewpoints of different categories of stakeholders from Romania related to their effective engagement in quality assurance activities in higher education. There are also highlighted a few elements on the time evolution of this problem in the European Higher Education Area, as they are reflected in the documents of the Bologna Process, in correlation with the missions of higher education. The data were obtained using a questionnaire, sent in Romania to different categories of stakeholders, under the framework of the project “Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities” – ESQA, co-financed by the Erasmus + Program, coordinated by the Ministry of Education of Romania in which ARACIS was a partner. The presented results show some differences between the level of agreement with the proposals aiming to ensure the effective participation of stakeholders in quality assurance activities. Thus, respondents representing categories of stakeholders from outside the academic communities, who are not well-informed about this concept, for instance, employers, expressed their intention to participate but mentioned some constraints, especially the lack of time for engaging in activities beyond their professional duties. The data served to draft and adopt by ARACIS of an Action Plan, aiming to stimulate stakeholders' genuine and effective engagement in higher education quality assurance.*

Keywords: *higher education, quality assurance, Bologna process, stakeholders, Survey on stakeholders' engagement in quality assurance of education*

Rezumat: *Scopul analizei prezentate în lucrare este de a investiga punctele de vedere exprimate de diversele categorii de părți interesate (“stakeholders”) din România, cu privire la angajarea lor eficientă în activități de asigurare a calității*

educației învățământului superior. Sunt evidențiate totodată și câteva elemente privind evoluția în timp a acestei probleme în Spațiul European al Învățământului Superior, așa cum rezultă din documentele programatice ale procesului Bologna, în corelare cu misiunile învățământului superior. Datele au fost obținute pe baza unui chestionar, difuzat în România către diferite categorii de părți interesate, în cadrul proiectului “Implicarea Eficace a Părților Interesate în Activități Externe de Asigurare a Calității – ESQA”, co-finanțat prin Programul Erasmus+, coordonat de Ministerul Educației din România, în care ARACIS a avut calitatea de partener. Rezultatele, prezentate în detaliu, arată că există diferențe între nivelurile de acceptare a propunerilor menite să asigure o participare eficientă a părților interesate la activitățile de asigurare a calității. Astfel, respondenții din afara comunităților academice, care sunt mai puțin informați asupra acestui concept, ca de exemplu angajatorii, menționează că sunt dispuși să se implice, dar își exprimă și anumite rezerve, legate în special de lipsa timpului necesar pentru a se implica în activități în afara obligațiilor lor profesionale. Datele obținute au servit la structurarea și adoptarea de către ARACIS a unui plan de activitate, menit să stimuleze participarea reală și eficientă a părților interesate la asigurarea calității învățământului superior.

Cuvinte cheie: *învățământ superior, asigurarea calității, procesul Bologna, părți interesate, chestionar privind implicarea părților interesate în asigurarea calității educației*

1. Introduction: “Quality of Education” vs “Quality Assurance of Institutions”?

The concept of “Quality of education” has been widely discussed, but it still raises some contradictory opinions, mainly related to “Quality assurance”. One interesting reference to the quality of education may be found in Yin Cheong Cheng, Wai Ming Tam, (1997). One major statement of the authors is that “Policies issued to implement educational changes for education quality often fail because of lack of comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of education quality in schools or higher education institutions”. They introduce nine educational models for quality education and conclude that “... these models can form a comprehensive framework for understanding and conceptualizing quality in education from different perspectives and facilitating the development of management strategies for achieving it”.

Thus, the difference between “quality of education” as a comprehensive set of points of view, definitions and expectations, and “quality assurance” as an ongoing quality enhancement process is an essential point to be underlined. Quality assurance is a process aiming to achieve a better “quality of education,” which may be defined in connection with any selected model or as a more comprehensive framework. Moreover, with the broad coverage in the media of university rankings, this difference is not very well clearly understood by stakeholders who, in many cases, identify the

quality of education with the results of one ranking or another. Therefore, it is to be underlined that most rankings are more related to some quality model and show a static image at one time moment. This becomes obvious especially when research comes into the definition of quality, leading to rankings of universities in categories related to scientometrics' indicators that are research results-focused and thus less concerned about "*the multiple concomitant purposes of preparation for the labour market, preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies, personal development and the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of an advanced, comprehensive and diverse knowledge base*" of the higher education, as per Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research (2007). To overcome the challenge of this complex interaction of concepts and public's / stakeholders' perception and for more clarity, in interpreting information on universities, the *U Multirank project* was developed for European universities (2008) and then implemented thereon globally with voluntary participation of HE institutions. This project uses the idea of "classification" of institutions, based on their similarities, and only then their ranking according to several criteria.

While the role of quality assurance of institutions is recognized and the process remains globally a priority, there are not very many references to qualitative and quantitative results reflected in "quality of higher education". A discussion on the impact evaluation of quality assurance may be found in Radu Damian, Josep Grifoll & Anke Rigbers (2015). This lack of empirical data may be a severe drawback in engaging stakeholders' representatives in external QA.

One of the few relevant examples in assessing the effects of QA in HEIs remains the EU-funded project *Impact analysis of external quality assurance processes of higher education institutions. Pluralistic Methodology and Application of a Formative Transdisciplinary Impact Evaluation (IMPALA)* (2013-2016) of EVALAG, Project Reference: 539481-LLP-1-2013-1-DE-ERASMUS-EIGF, with ARACIS and the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest among the project partners. The overall results of the project can be found in Leiber (editor) (2019), while in the Romanian context, details are published in Bejan and all (2018).

2. The "Bologna Process" and QA: How All Stakeholders Could Make the Most of its Results?

The "reform" of higher education in Europe, known as the "Bologna process", initiated with the "Bologna Declaration" (1999), has become over the years more and more comprehensive and complex. The 2010 Budapest-Vienna ministerial conference was an important milestone, marking the creation of the European Higher Education Area - EHEA (2010), which has become a wide area of "competitive cooperation" of European universities, where EU and non-EU countries sharing the common values of the European Cultural Convention of the Council of

Europe (1954) are all represented. Every two or three years, there are Ministerial Conferences organized to assess the progress made within the EHEA and decide on the new steps to be taken. The Bologna Follow-up Group - BFUG (2003) oversees the Bologna Process between the ministerial meetings. The BFUG meetings play an essential role in overseeing the implementation of the ministerial Communiqués and developing the Bologna Process. EHEA/BFUG members include 49 countries and the European Commission - EC. The developments of structural reforms and shared tools of the Bologna process have become a reference for higher education systems worldwide.

In the Bucharest ministerial Communiqué (2012), the ministers responsible for higher education affirmed: *“We commit to both maintaining the public responsibility for **quality assurance and involving a wide range of stakeholders in this development actively**”*. In the Paris Communiqué (2018), the ministers stated that *“Fulfilling our commitments depends on the concerted efforts of **national policy-makers, public authorities, institutions, staff, students and other stakeholders as well as coordination at EHEA level**”*. On The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - [ENQA website](#), one may find that *“The Standards and guidelines for **quality assurance** in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG) provide the framework for internal and external quality assurance. They were revised and adopted at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference (2015). ENQA worked in partnership with the rest of the E4 Group ([EUA](#), [EURASHE](#) and [ESU](#)), other stakeholder organizations ([Education International](#), [Business Europe](#)), and with [EQAR](#) to draft the ESG 2015. The E4 Group was also the author of the original version of the ESG in 2005. Implementing quality assurance in line with the ESG is one of the key commitments of the Bologna Process. As such, the ESG provide the basis for enhancing trust, mobility and recognition between higher education systems.”*

As the BFUG is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between the Ministerial Conferences, its role is crucial for implementing the educational policy commitments of the ministers. Under the framework of BFUG, three Bologna thematic peer-learning groups (TPLs) have been created. The contribution of TPLs in the implementation phase has been recognized by the EC, providing projects-based financial support.

After discussing several topics of interest in their 2018 meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia, the Bologna thematic peer-learning group TPL C on *Quality Assurance* members identified the theme *“Role and engagement of stakeholders in internal and external quality assurance”* as being one in which work still has to be done in the member countries. Therefore, the Romania-initiated project *“Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities (ESQA)”*, project number 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3_BOLOGNA, was co-funded in the framework of the ERASMUS+ Programme of the European Union and the Romanian Ministry of Education (2018-2021).

The Romanian Ministry of Education led the project consortium as the national authority. It included three European organizations representing quality assurance agencies - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ENQA, universities - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education - EURASHE and students - European Students' Union - ESU and five quality assurance agencies from Romania (ARACIS), France (High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education - HCERES), Bulgaria (National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency - NEAA), Denmark (The Danish Accreditation Institution - DAI) and Republic of Moldova (National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research - ANACEC). The „Study on stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance” was authored by Miljia Homan, Jakub Grodecki and Vaidotas Viliunas (2020). The study results are published on the ENQA webpage (2020), but they can also be found on EURASHE and ARACIS webpages. In addition, the study was published by the Ministry of Education of Romania and the ESQA project in paper format (2020).

One discussion on stakeholders' categories and the understandings of the term in the Romanian and international context may also be found in Daniela-Cristina Ghitulica and Radu-Mircea Damian, The “Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance” Brings in New Challenges for Higher Education, (2020).

The results of the project confirmed that the categories of stakeholders involved or who should be involved in external QA processes and activities are students, alumni, employers, teaching staff, other staff of HEIs, teachers' unions, students' unions, professional bodies, university associations, national HE authority, local authorities, civil society as well as others, considered as specific by some respondents.

Following the findings of the study, the “Guide for effective stakeholders' involvement in QA”, authored by Julien Bollaert and Stefan Delplace (2020), became an essential outcome of the project, where quality assurance agencies could consider many possible answers on how to make this commitment effective and applied in their activity shortly. The Guide was translated into Romanian and published by ARACIS in paper format and online (2020). The proposals included in the Guide served as a starting point of a needs analysis based on the ten selected discussion *Themes* to support the action plans of agencies for the next period. The needs analysis of ARACIS was made public and disseminated to different categories of stakeholders as a questionnaire/survey. The stakeholders were asked to share their opinions with the Agency on the proposals to be included in its action plan.

3. Analysis of the Results of the ARACIS Survey in Romania

The results of the analysis of the responses received from the *Survey on the actions for more effective involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance activities of ARACIS* (2021) under the framework of the ESQA project were also reported as part of the project outputs.

The purpose of the Survey was to find out the stakeholders' views to identify new lines of action that ARACIS can pursue to increase stakeholder involvement in its external QA activity. The questionnaire/survey was sent to stakeholders in the higher education and quality assurance area and other stakeholders, such as representatives of students and teachers, employers, public institutions, civil society, mass media.

Stakeholders were invited to review the analysis and action proposals, available at https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ARACIS-Analysis-of-the-needs-for-change_ESQA-Project_May-2021.pdf, as well as the *Guide for effective stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance activities*

Paragraph 3.1 introduces comprehensive data on participants and respondents. The presentation of results, presented in paragraph 3.2, follows the order, notations and phrasing used in the Survey to avoid a redundant presentation of the questionnaire/survey itself.

3.1 Overall Data of the Number of Responses

The total number of persons who accessed the questionnaire/survey was **103**, while the maximum number of responses to all questions was **97**. The number of responses received for some of the questions was smaller.

The respondents came from 52 institutions, from the categories mentioned below (some institutions provided more responses, such as teaching staff and/or university administrators), with students presented separately.

The percentage of responses out of the total number of persons who accessed the Survey was **94.17%**

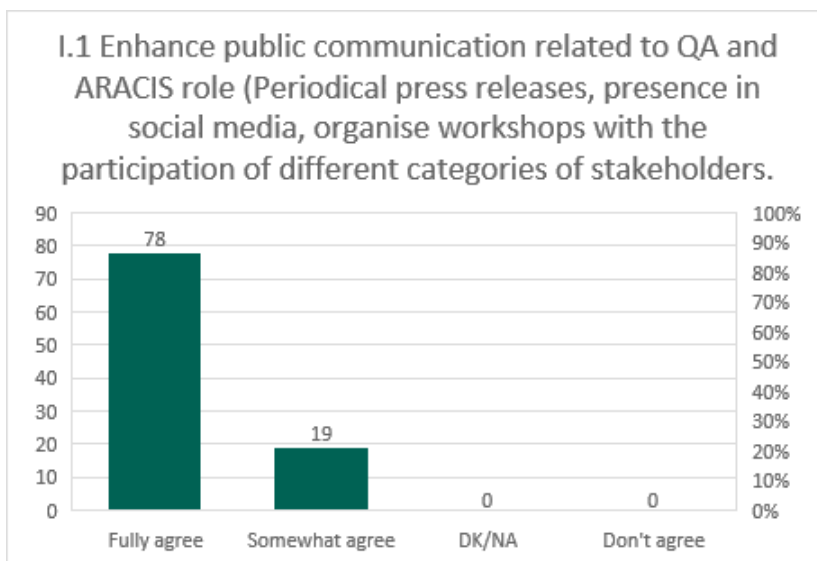
In the total number of **52** contacted institutions that responded, the categories are the following: 32 (61.5%) universities, out of which **20** public and **12** private ones; **3** (5.8%) research institutes; **14** (26.9%) Employers, **14**, out of which **two** representatives of media institutions; **3** (5.8%) other institutions.

The number of students/student associations that responded is **24** (**24.7%** out of the total number of respondents (97)).

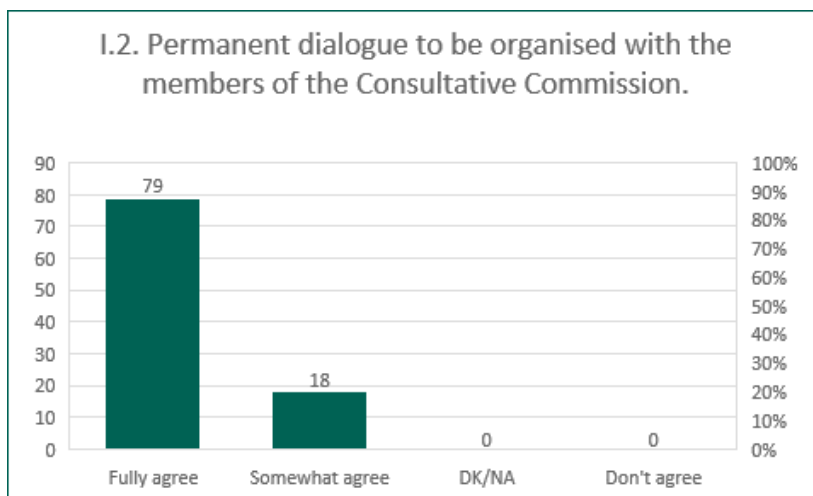
3.2 Overview of the Responses (Total Number of Validated Responses: 97)

This presentation covers the respondents' answers in both image and tabular forms per subject to facilitate an overall image. The opinions and proposals of respondents are presented directly to the reader for each critical question, in tabular form, including the category of the respondent(s). Other proposals and opinions are listed at the end of the subject-type presentation of answers. This approach is justified by the fact that the size of the sample was not very large, so it might raise problems of significance and confidence when attempting to generalize the answers. However, the answers were considered valuable and relevant as a basis for the Action plan of the Agency. Some authors' remarks are introduced in tables only as clarification, for instance, when some identical proposal comes from respondents working together in the same institution.

Subject I. Sharing underlying concepts of quality in higher education and quality assurance systems



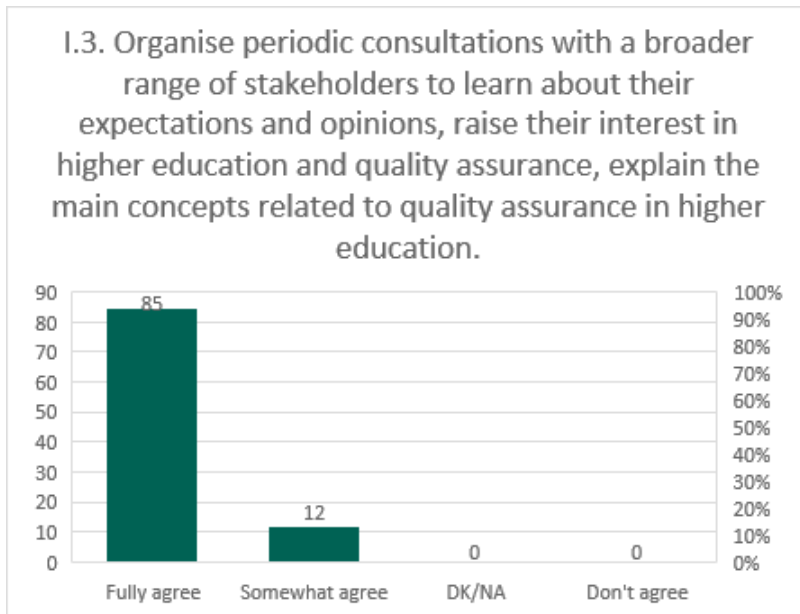
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
78 (80.40%)	19 (19.60%)	-	-



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
79 (81.40%)	18 (18.60%)	-	-

**The Consultative Commission of ARACIS 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. Furthermore, the commission members assist the institutional evaluation panels in the quality assurance activity, offer an objective and transparent opinion on the process, and are included in the commissions solving the appeals of higher education institutions.



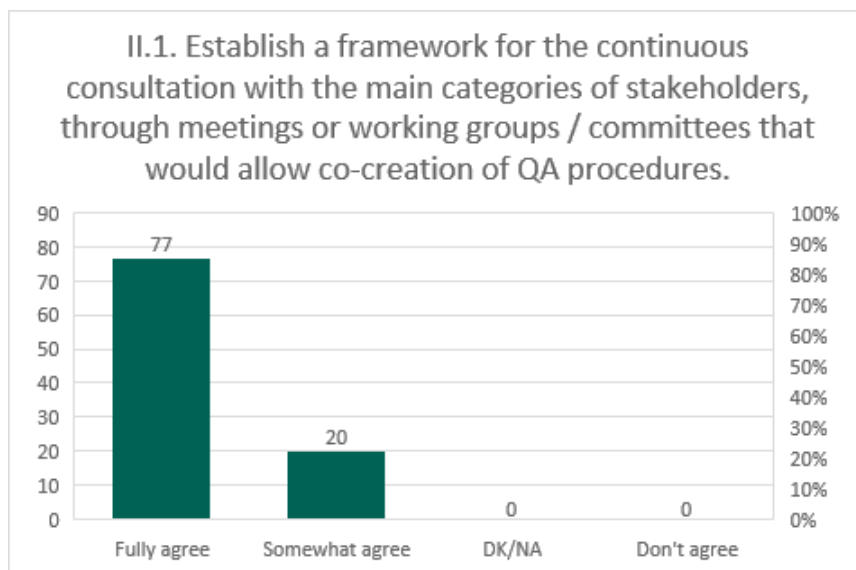
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
85 (87.60%)	12 (12.40%)	-	-

OTHER PROPOSALS

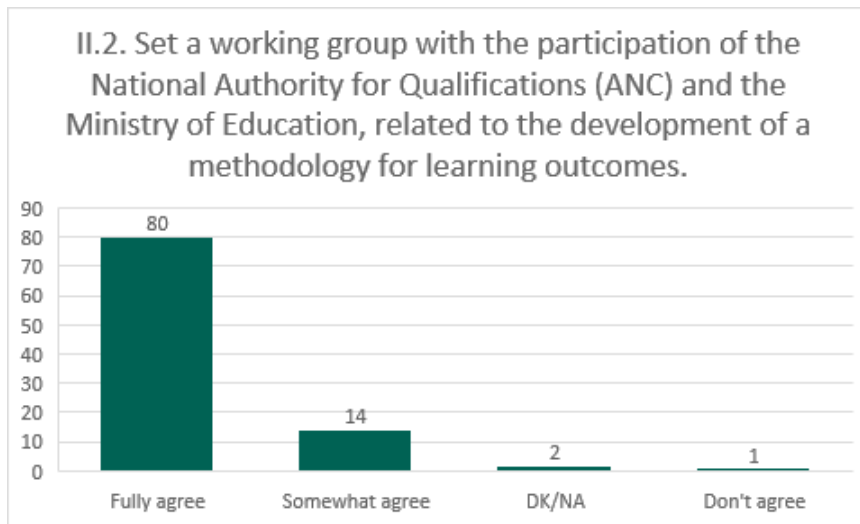
From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Delineate research activities and educational activities.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Consult the religious denominations that organized confessional higher education institutions.	*) From several people from the same confessional higher education institutions, similar proposals were received for all the questions.
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Each university is a distinct entity. It is essential to take into account the specificity, the mission, and the objectives of each university - especially the dogmatic and canonical specificity of confessional universities.	

Student	I agree with any meetings where issues are discussed and debated and new ideas are shared for the improvement of higher education in Romania.	
Employer	A more active presence of ARACIS in the public space by participating in interviews debates in the mass media (more than press releases, which nobody believes).	
Employer	Include representatives of the Employers, as stakeholders, in the membership of the Consultative Commissions (the representatives to be appointed by the employers based on specific professional criteria), to communicate the needs related to educating and training students to reach the objective “current students, future employees, with specific skills, built for a specific Employer, based on a list of demands, defined through the portfolio of actions, in correlation with the institutional development policy and strategy.”	
Employer	A more significant opening towards employers would essentially contribute to a more accurate evaluation of universities in Romania.	

Subject II. Diversity of categories of stakeholders and their different roles, especially in consultations.



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/No answer	Disagree
77 (79.40%)	20 (20.6%)	-	-



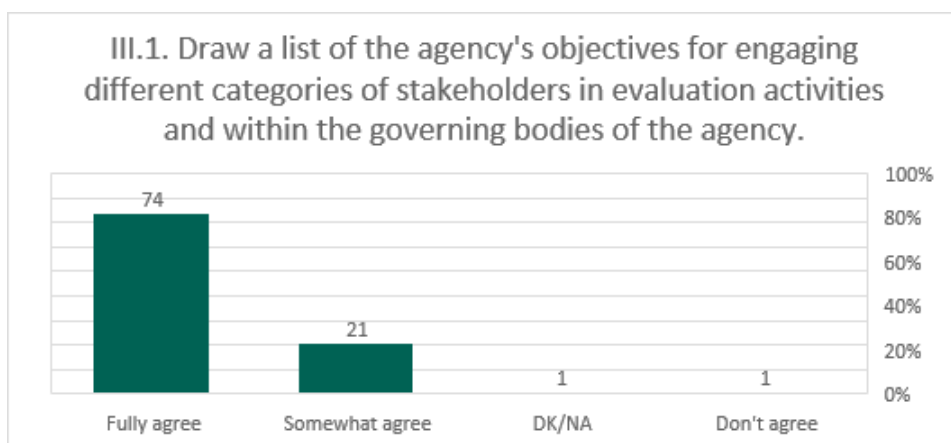
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/No answer	Disagree
80 (82.5%)	14 (14.4%)	2 (2.1%)	(1%)

OTHER PROPOSALS

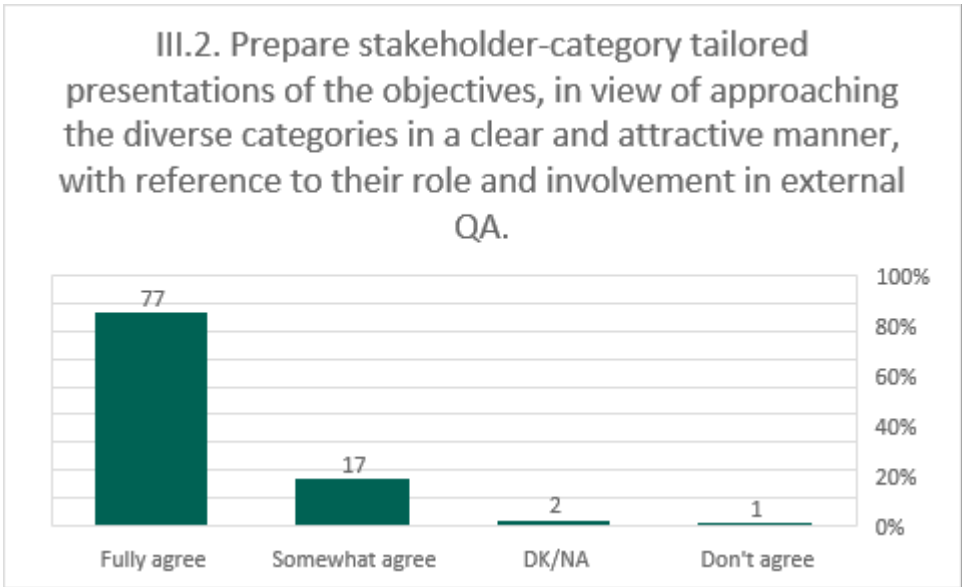
From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Permanent expert, employers' representative, in commission C10	Maintain a continuous dialogue with the business environment.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Observe the confessional, dogmatic and canonical specificity within universities, according to the concept of university autonomy and the provisions of the National Education Law no. 1/2011, as subsequently amended and supplemented.	<i>*) From several people from the same confessional higher education institutions, similar proposals were received for all the questions.</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	The quality assurance agency should use public forms in the evaluation activities, available for all evaluated institutions.	<i>Such forms are in place, and they are public</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Correlate the ANC database, in terms of the validation and registration of the qualifications in the RNCIS, with the ARACIS database, starting from the structure of the higher education institutions, approved by Government Decisions or by Ministerial Orders.	

Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	I propose to avoid excessive bureaucratization by creating a large number of commissions that will propose a multitude of surveys and consultations, which can take an excessive amount of the time allocated for study and efficient interaction with the students. I think that graduates and employers have a vital role in these consultations.	
Employer	The working group should include universities too, but especially private universities if we want to have results after graduation, the future of education in the private sector. There is such a significant discrepancy between what we want and where we are because pupils/ students are enrolled in a public system for 15-17 years, and then they work in the private sector. When we hire them, we realize that they are disconnected from reality. We have much, much better experiences with graduates coming from private universities.	<i>Mass media employer - specialized in information related to the confessional education</i>
Employer	Create an extended Working Group to include representatives of the Employers, especially from among Employers who developed cooperation/ collaboration relationships based on partnerships and who can hire/have hired graduates.	

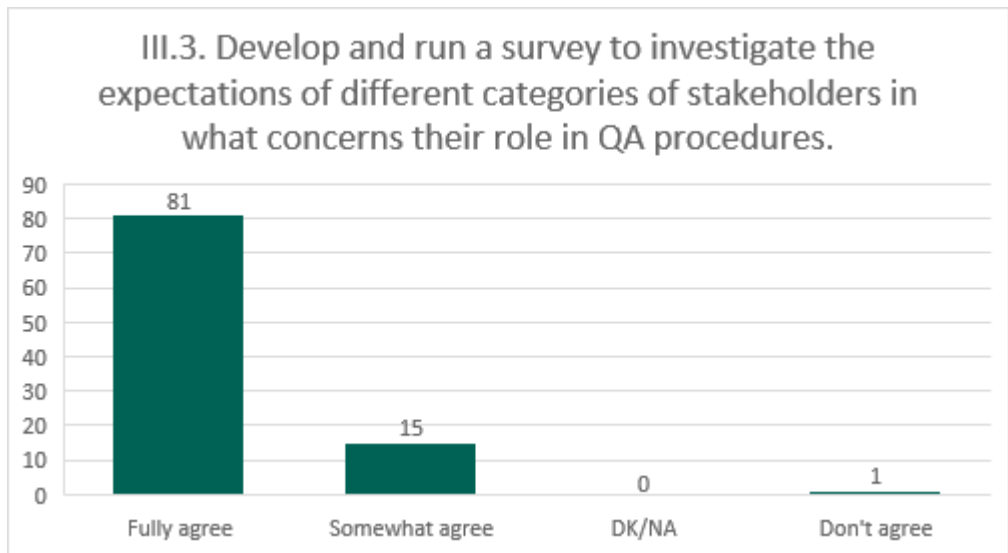
Subject III. Objectives of stakeholders' involvement



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
74 (76.2%)	21 (21.8%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
77 (79.4%)	17 (17.5%)	2 (2.1%)	1 (1%)



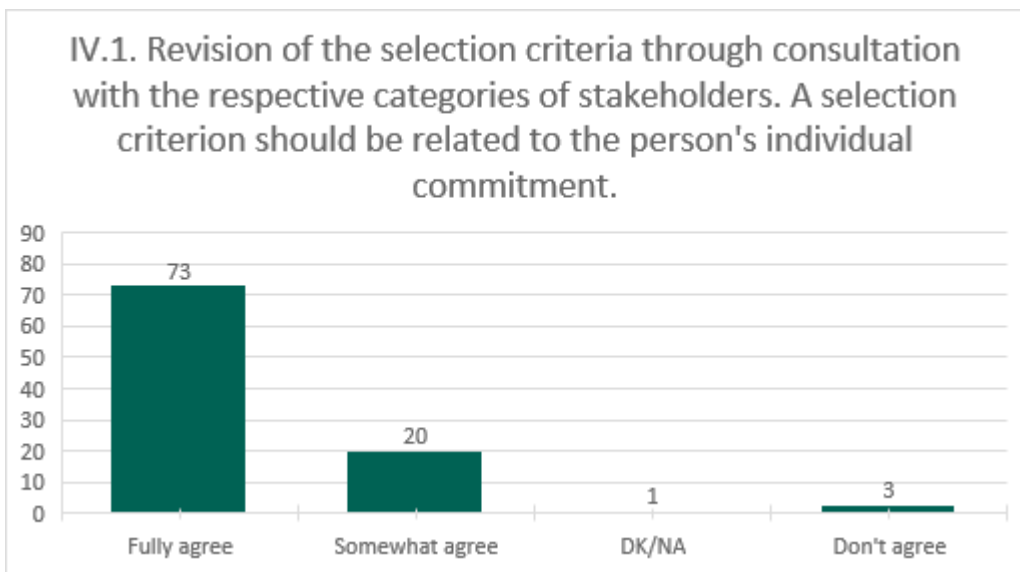
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
81 (83.5%)	15 (15.5%)	-	1 (1%)

OTHER PROPOSALS

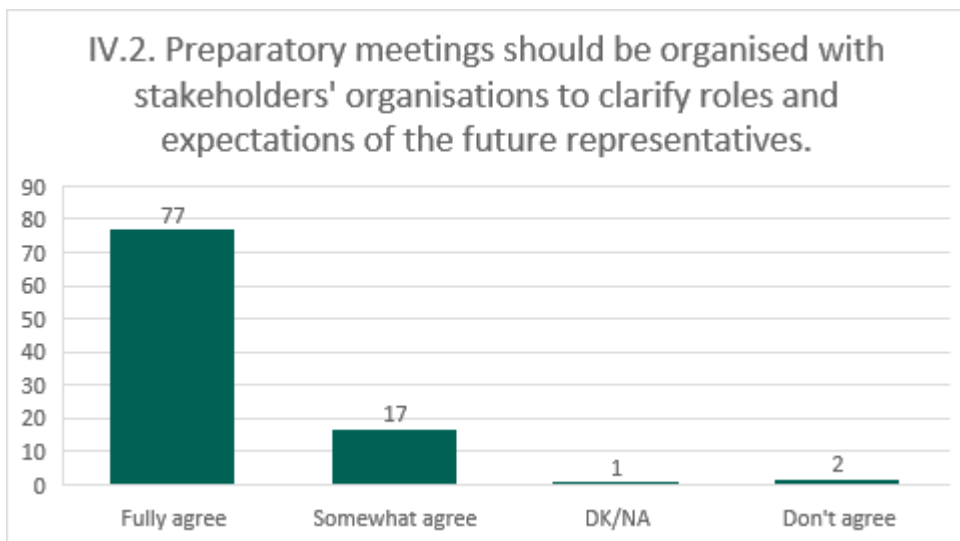
From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Collect best practices in quality assurance from universities in order to establish the objectives.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	We request the representatives of the recognized religious denominations that organize confessional higher education institutions to be involved.	*) <i>Proposals from several people from the same confessional higher education institutions received proposals for all the questions.</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	We respectfully request that, based on university autonomy and while respecting the specificity of every higher education institution, universities can have a say in selecting the categories of stakeholders that will be involved in the evaluation processes, as well as in establishing the objectives that will be presented to them.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	The evaluation of each university should be simplified and rendered more efficient, depending on the specificity of each university. Homogenization with the risk of eliminating those elements that are specific may lead to a diminution of creativity in education.	
Student	I fully agree with any improvements that can be brought to our attention.	
Student	Outline some shared directions in the implementation of the educational process so that all stakeholders can benefit from it.	
Employer	Under the auspices of the Agency, organize meetings between employers and the higher education institution to continuously adapt the content of courses/seminars/laboratories to the current demands of the labour market.	
Employer	Maybe a survey is not enough; we believe a more detailed analysis could provide more information.	

Employer	<p>The main expectations of Employers as stakeholders are related to the needs in terms of training and preparing students, in line with achieving the objective “current students à future employees, with specific competencies correlated with the specificity of the Employer, the scope of business, the institutional development policy and strategy”.</p> <p>Communication must be mutual too, in the sense of achieving information feedback, from the employer to the Trainer/Higher Education Institution and the other way around, to ensure the compliance of curricula and vocational training with the needs established/expressed by each employer, and based on analyzing how students respond/get actively engaged in meeting these demands.</p> <p>To improve the process of integration of the students as future employees in the structure of the employer, and in order to develop (to the employer) the benefit of added value, given the experience accumulated by INCAS as an Employer, several stages are required for the students to become aware (1), (2-) and gradually involved (2+), (3), (4), (5) in the current activities of the employer, namely: 1/ volunteering, 2/ practical internship, 3/ applied research internship for supplementing/finalizing the Bachelor’s Project, for the bachelor studies cycle, 4/ applied research internship for finalizing the Dissertation for the master programme, 5/ applied research internship for supplementing/finalizing the significant chapters of the Doctoral thesis, for the doctoral study cycle.</p> <p>We mention that proposals (3), (4), (5) on applied research, specific for each long-term education cycle (bachelor, master and doctoral studies), are new elements meant to add value, meaning that the research topics proposed (by the higher education unit, as the Trainer) for the bachelor project/dissertation / doctoral thesis are correlated with the current research-development projects of the employer and that some of the research-development projects are carried out in a collaboration based on a partnership between the employer and the higher education institution/s.</p>	
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Subject IV. Recruitment/selection of the stakeholders' representatives



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
73 (75.3%)	20 (20.6%)	1 (1%)	3 (3.1%)



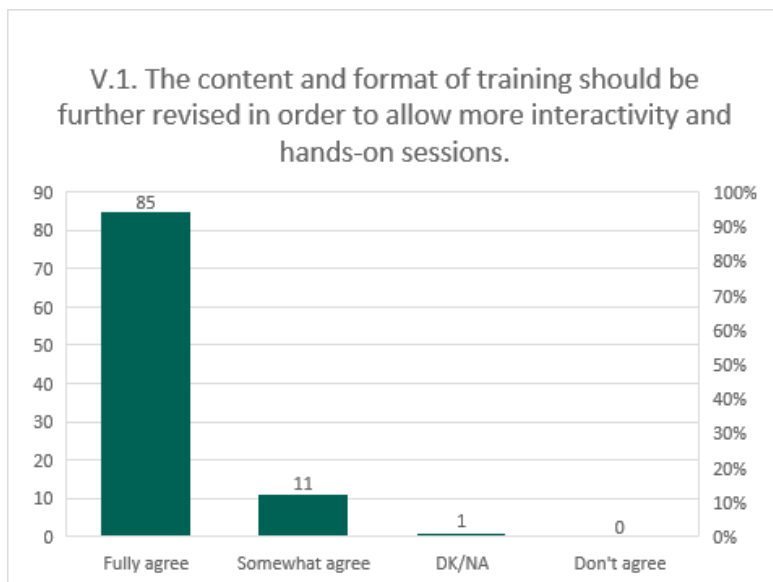
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
77 (79.4%)	17 (17.5%)	1 (1%)	2 (2.1%)

OTHER PROPOSALS

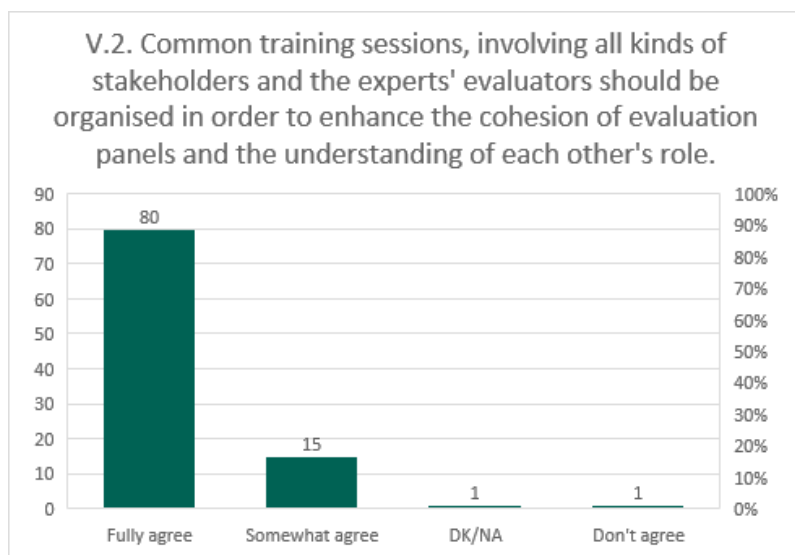
From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Representatives of private universities among the representatives of stakeholders, other than those coming from Bucharest private universities.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	It would be helpful to include the CEAC coordinators of universities among the stakeholders.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	I propose the categories of stakeholders to be defined clearly, namely higher education institutions and the employers of their graduates. Furthermore, universities should have the possibility to select their stakeholders.	<i>The stakeholders are defined in the ESG</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	I propose that each university can propose persons familiar with the university's specific nature. In particular, have in mind confessional universities.	*) <i>Proposals from several people from the same confessional higher education institutions received proposals for all the questions.</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	My suggestion is that the involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation of universities be in alignment with the role they play in the narrower context of the social, economic and - last, but not least - a religious environment, in the case of confessional universities.	
Employer	Preparatory meetings with employers are challenging to organize, and it is not easy to ensure relevant participation due to their large numbers and a wide variety. The roles of the representatives will be communicated to them on the occasion of the organized training activities, and their expectations are specific to the organization/industry they come from.	
Employer	Regarding the selection criteria for the persons who would represent stakeholders' interests, the vocational background, abilities, and experiences should be considered in terms of research development and the education system. Considering the mere personal employment, which only expresses the desire for personal involvement, is not sufficient and, in certain circumstances, it would not even be indicated. It is a priori assumption that a person who wants to represent these interests of the stakeholders will express	

	<p>their involvement at the same time; however, mere benevolence is not sufficient - competencies and skills are required as well, acquired both through education/training and experience.</p>	
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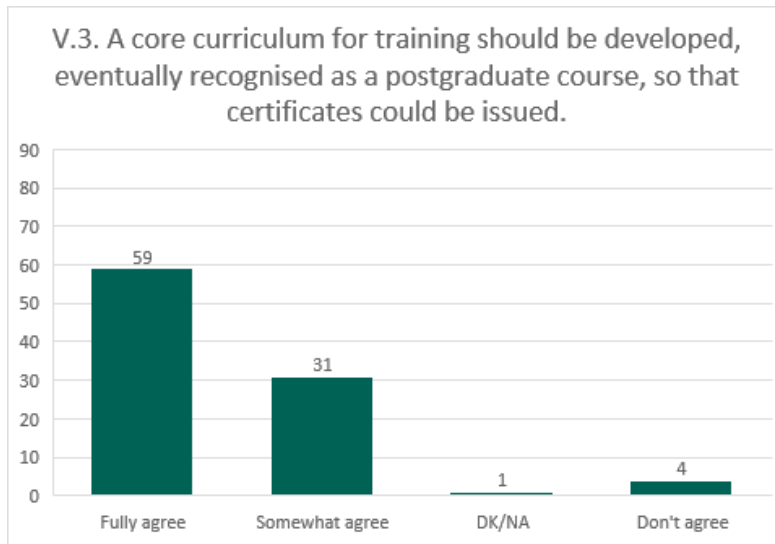
Subject V. Training of stakeholders



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
85 (87.6%)	11 (11.4%)	1 (1%)	-



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
80 (82.5%)	15 (15.5%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)



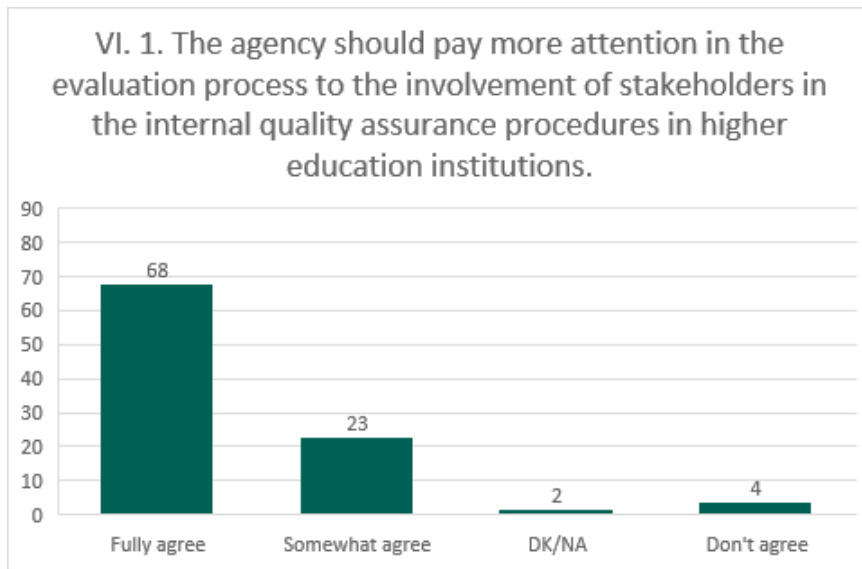
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
59 (62.1%)	31 (32.7%)	1 (1%)	4 (4.2%)

(Only 95 persons answered this question; non-responders: one person in the 'universities' category; one person in the 'research institutes' category)

OTHER PROPOSALS

From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Adopt some provisions of the American education system.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	In the case of students, I do not think a certificate of completion is in order because they have not completed their bachelor studies, but they could have credits added to their volunteering work portfolio.	

Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Respect the university's autonomy in proposing the disciplines of the common core of the curriculum. The specificity of the confessional universities should be kept in mind when establishing the curriculum for training these specialists.	<i>*) Proposals from several people from the same confessional higher education institutions received proposals for all the questions.</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Train the evaluators and the members of the evaluated institution to ensure a HOMOGENEOUS approach to the standards.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Respect and encourage creativity and innovation in education, depending on the specificity of the university.	
Employer	Agree with the common core of the curriculum for training. But for students and employers, I do not think this could be deemed as a postgraduate course with graduation certificates issued because the knowledge is only necessary and valuable during the mandate as a member of the Permanent Speciality Experts' Commissions.	
Employer	Having a pragmatic approach on the curriculum would be desirable.	
Employer	The content and format of the training sessions must be updated regularly (once in 4 months or once in 6 months, correlated with the structure of the academic year) and correlated depending on the response coming from both directions (Employer to Trainer/higher education institution, and the other way around), per segments of informational feedback, in line with the compliance of the vocational training curricula with the needs established/expressed by each employer, and based on the analysis of how students integrate with the employer's structures, for the needs to be formulated at the current level of knowledge and professional abilities of the young employees.	

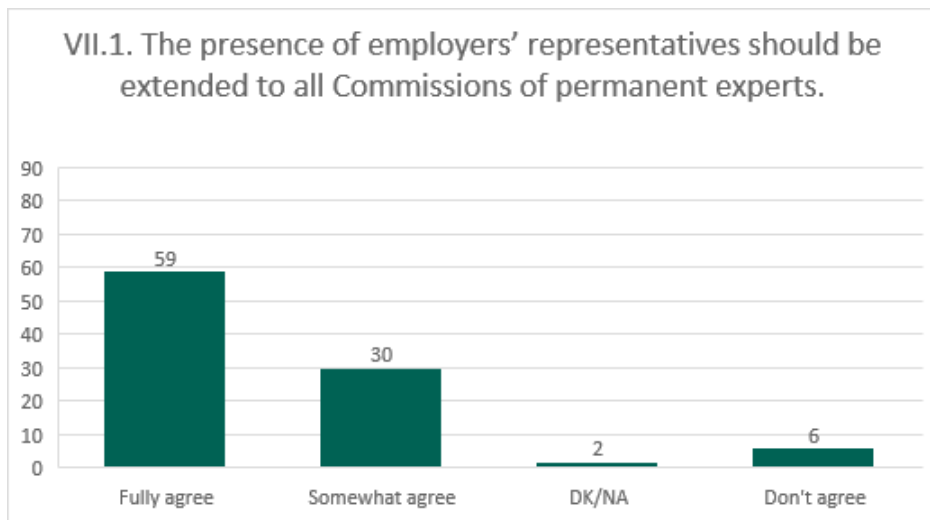
Subject VI. Involvement of stakeholders in reviews

Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
68 (70.1%)	23 (23.6%)	2 (2.1%)	4 (4.2%)

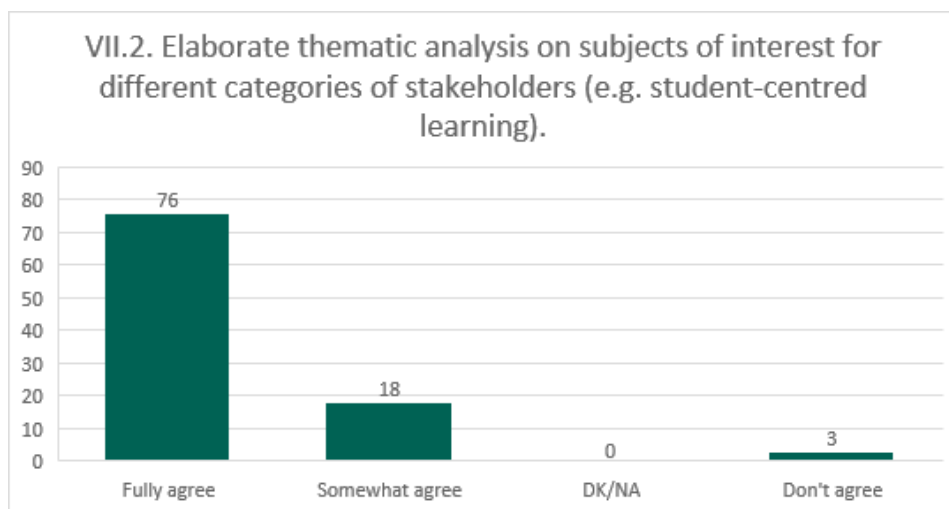
OTHER PROPOSALS

From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	I think that the opinions of the graduates and the employers of the university's graduates should be primarily taken into account.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Greater attention should be paid to the possible excessive bureaucratization of everything that the evaluation process entails, with all the participants involved in this activity. In time, this could prove to be counter-productive for a proper education and training process.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Provide a clear definition of "stakeholders" to avoid situations of people who are not familiar with the specificity of a university and the study programmes becoming experts by attending a course. Increased university autonomy is a crucial element for obtaining high performance in the international competition.	

Subject VII. Involvement of stakeholders in the governance and organization of quality assurance agencies



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
59 (60.8%)	30 (30.9%)	2 (2.1%)	6 (6.2%)



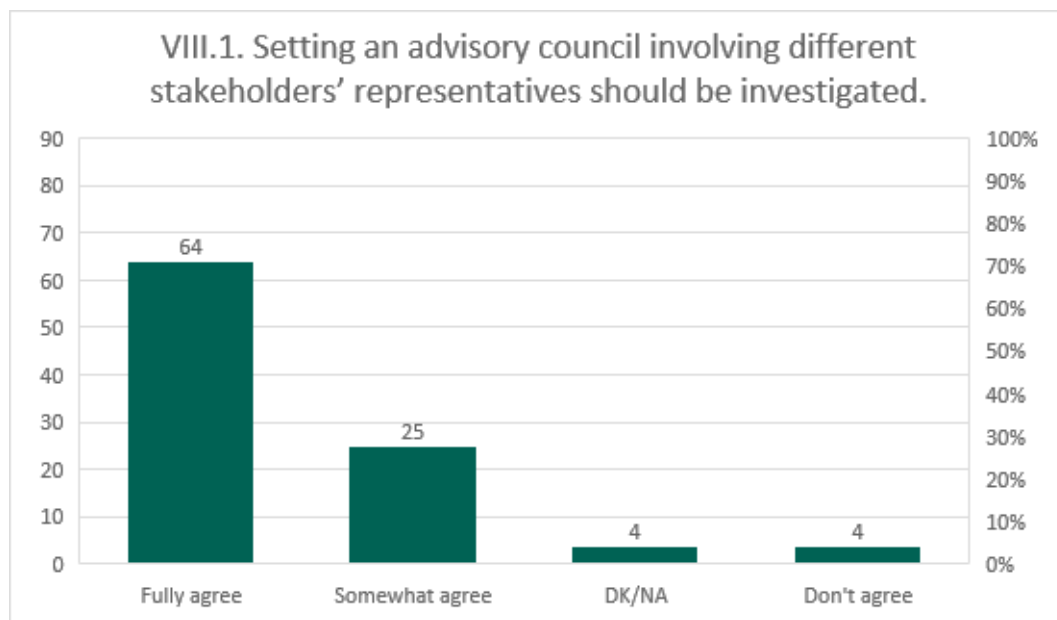
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
76 (78.4%)	18 (18.5%)	-	3 (3.1%)

OTHER PROPOSALS

From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Permanent expert, employers' representative, in commission C10	Involvement of the employers' representatives should create added value, rather than being merely formal.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	The presence of employers is not necessary for all permanent speciality experts' commissions.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	The employers' representatives in the quality assurance commissions should be representative for each university and, in the case of confessional universities, they should be members of that religious denomination.	*) <i>Proposals from several people from the same confessional higher education institutions received proposals for all the questions.</i>
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	The evaluation should be adapted to the specificity of the education institution; the employers' recommendations concerning the mandatory introduction of specific disciplines that are not in the standards should be accepted, and there should be communication between the stakeholders.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	How would the employers' representatives be selected in all the permanent speciality experts' commissions (by pursuing national representativeness, by looking at the results obtained, the scope of business, the size, etc.)? Could their permanent availability be ensured for all the activities specific to the quality assurance agency?	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	The employers' representatives must be familiar with the specific standards for each domain. The entire evaluation process must be relevant, efficient, non-bureaucratic and apolitical.	

Employer	The possibility of implementing actual actions and actively involving the business environment in substantiating the educational requirements, in the drawing up of the study graduation works, and in the panels that evaluate how these objectives are achieved should be analyzed.	
Employer	We believe that learning is too student-centred; rather, it should be graduate-centred. What does the graduate know to do? What is their capacity in the labour market?	

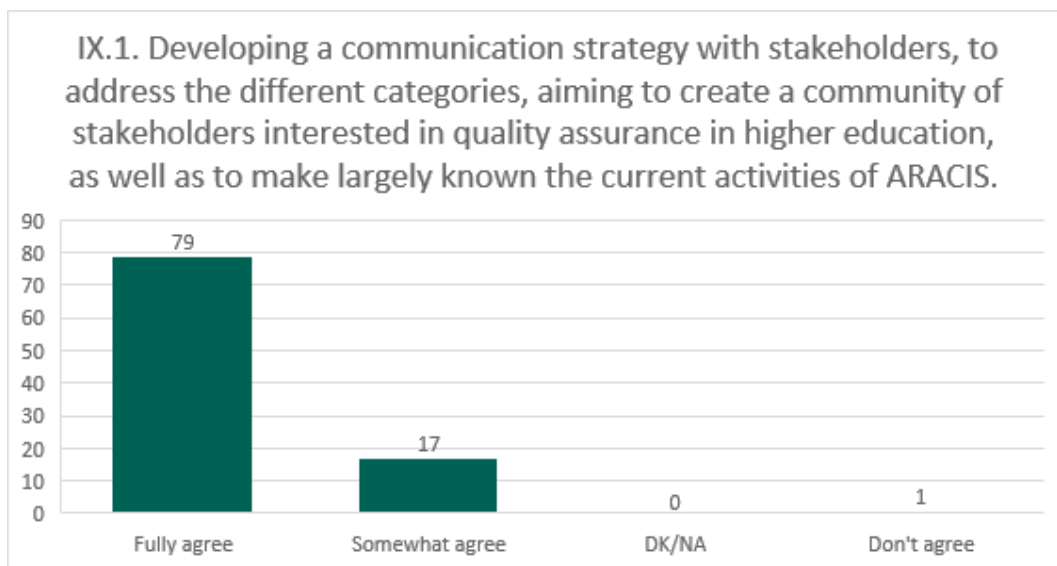
Subject VIII. Independence vis-a-vis of stakeholders' involvement



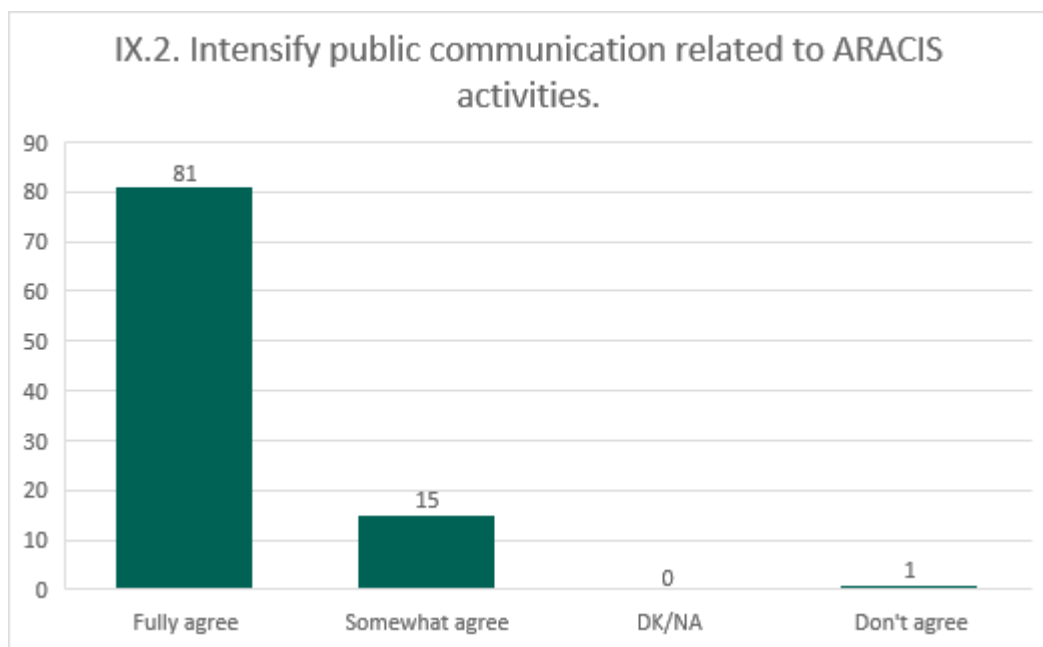
Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
64 (66%)	25 (25.6%)	4 (4.2%)	4 (4.2%)

OTHER PROPOSALS

From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Representatives of private universities should be involved as well.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	In the case of employers, it was already proposed that they be part of the speciality commissions.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	We propose avoiding excessive bureaucratization in the quality evaluation process, as that would overwhelm the educational process in higher education institutions.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	A multitude of committees and commissions would lead to increased bureaucratization, and they would become costly and time-consuming.	
Employer	The advisory council is vital	

Subject IX. *Communication and transparency towards stakeholders*

Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/No answer	Disagree
79 (81.4%)	17 (17.6%)	-	1 (1%)

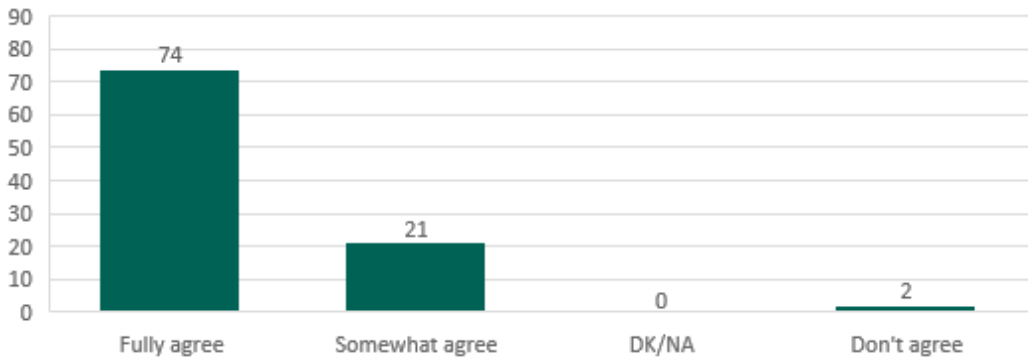


Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
81 (83.5%)	15 (15.5%)	-	1 (1%)



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
74 (76.3%)	19 (19.5%)	-	4 (4.2%)

IX.4. For each study domain, organise a yearly conference/workshop, where representative of the permanent speciality commissions, academics and evaluators from the domain present syntheses/statistics/analyses regarding evaluation processes in the current year



Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
74 (76.3%)	21 (21.6%)	-	2 (2.1%)

OTHER PROPOSALS

From (respondents)	Proposal	Authors' Remarks
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Improve the channels of direct communication with each university, depending on the specificity of that university.	
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	I suggest direct communication with each university, depending on the specificity of that university.	
Employer	Extend this type of Survey to cover other areas of interest.	
Employer	Communities are consolidated around their interests, which, in the case of employers, are different from the universities' interests. Multiple factors determine the interests of a specific workforce type, and they are not the same; they are not constant.	

4. Discussion, Final Remarks and Conclusions

According to the data presented in paragraph 3.1, most responses came from universities: academics, non-academic staff, and students. This should not be surprising, considering that, according to ESG (2015), the responsibility of quality assurance is for the universities. The result indicates that in universities, there is an awareness of the need to involve other stakeholders in external quality assurance and, in addition, in their procedures of internal quality assurance. However, it may also indicate that other stakeholders, mainly external to higher education, are less aware of the direct and indirect benefits of their direct engagement in quality assurance activities.

4.1. General Remarks

4.1.1. For the proposals under points and sub-points (as applicable), I, II, III, IV, V.1, V.2, VI, VII.1, VII.2, IX, the minimum percentage of responses of *Fully agree* is 60.8. For all these points/sub-points, the high number/percentage of responses deemed as positive (*Fully agree* and *Somewhat agree*) **substantiate the inclusion of the proposed actions in the Action Plan.**

4.1.2. The percentage of *Do not agree* answers is below 5, except for sub-point *VII.1. The presence of employers' representatives should be extended to all Permanent Specialty Experts' Commissions*, where the percentage is 6.2. This result probably indicates that the respondents are aware of the difficulties of identifying representative employers and employers who would be available to be involved in activities outside their current professional tasks.

4.1.3. The Do not know/no answer percentage is between 0 (for five sub-points) and 4.2 - at *VIII.1. Setting an advisory council involving different stakeholders' representatives should be investigated, which is 4.2*. The results probably show that, in general, the respondents are interested in external quality evaluation, and they deem that they can provide pertinent answers for those questions in the Survey. The *VIII.1* correlate with the specific conclusions of this sub-point, further presented under C.2.

4.2. Specific Remarks

We provide details below on the results of the questions at which the percentages of *Fully agree* answers were below 70 and for which the difference is likely to be included in the percentages of *Somewhat agree* answers. The tables also mention the percentages of answers given by the various categories of respondents, based on the total number of similar answers. For instance, for the answer *Fully agree* at question V.3, out of 59 responses received, 14 come from public universities, accounting for 23.7 % of all similar responses received; an equal percentage was obtained from the 14 answers received from private universities.

By cumulating the percentages for the *Fully agree* and *Somewhat agree* answers, it may be concluded that there are no significant differences between the categories of respondents that gave them. This observation is valid for all the four questions for which the answers are analyzed below:

Proposal V.3. *A core curriculum for training should be developed, eventually recognized as a postgraduate course so that certificates could be issued.*

Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
59 (62.1%) Public universities 14 <i>(23.7%)</i> Private universities 14 <i>(23.7%)</i> Students' associations and students 19 (3 associations and 16 students) <i>(32.2%)</i> Research institutes 1 <i>(1.7%)</i> Employers 10 <i>(17%)</i> Other 1 <i>(1.7%)</i>	31 (32.6%) Public universities 13 <i>(41.9%)</i> Private universities 6 <i>(19.3%)</i> Students' associations and students 5 <i>(16.1%)</i> Research institutes 2 <i>(6.5%)</i> Employers 3 <i>(9.7%)</i> Other 2 <i>(6.5%)</i>	1 (1.1%)	4 (4.2%)

Comparison of the percentages of *Fully agree* answers for **V.3** reveals a certain amount of reluctance concerning the proposal; however, due to the nature of the question, cumulating several ideas/action proposals, the reason for such reluctance was not identified.

Proposal VI. 1. *The Agency should pay more attention in the evaluation process to the involvement of stakeholders in the internal quality assurance procedures in higher education institutions.*

Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
68 (70.1%) Public universities 19 <i>(27.9%)</i> Private universities 16 <i>(23.5%)</i> Students' associations and students 18 (3 associations and 15 students) <i>(26.5%)</i>	23 (23.6%) Public universities 10 <i>(43.5%)</i> Private universities 3 <i>(13%)</i> Students' associations and students 6 (1 association and 5 students) <i>(26.1%)</i>	2 (2.1%)	4 (4.2%)

Research institutes 3 (4.4%) Employers 10 (14.7%) Other 2 (3%)	Research institutes 1 (4.4%) Employers 3 (13%)		
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Comparing the percentages of *Fully agree* answers for VI.1 shows that the proposal cannot be deemed rejected. However, it indicates that its implementation will have to be done very carefully, preferably in a bottom-up approach, involving departments and faculties.

Proposal VII.1. *The presence of employers’ representatives should be extended to all Permanent Specialty Experts’ Commissions.*

Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/ No answer	Disagree
59 (60.8%) Public universities 16 (27.1%) Private universities 11 (18.7%) Students’ associations and students 15 (3 association and 12 students) (25.4%) Employers 13 (22%) Research institutes 2 (3.4%) Other 2 (3.4%)	30 (30.9%) Public universities 10 (33.4%) Private universities 9 (30%) Students’ associations and students 7 (1 association and 6 students) (23.3%) Research institutes 2 (6.7%) Employers 1 (3.3%) Other 1 (3.3%)	2 (2.1%)	6 (6.2%)

Comparison of the percentages of *Fully agree* answers mentioned for VII. 3 shows that this proposal scored the minimal percentage, which indicates that the respondents are probably aware of the difficulties related to the actual implementation.

Proposal VIII.1. *Setting an advisory council involving different stakeholders' representatives should be investigated.*

Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Do not know/No answer	Disagree
<p>64 (66%) Public universities 18 (28.1%) Private universities 16 (25%) Students' associations and students 17 (3 association and 14 students) (26.5%) Research institutes 3 (4.7%) Employers 9 (14.1%) Other 1 (1.6%)</p>	<p>25 (25.6%) Public universities 9 (36%) Private universities 3 (12%) Students 7 (28%) Research institutes 1 (4%) Employers 4 (16%) Other 1 (4%)</p>	<p>4 (4.2%)</p>	<p>4 (4.2%)</p>

We deem that, in this case, the respondents were somewhat reluctant to create an additional advisory body, the role and set of competencies of which should be clearly defined.

4.3. Additional Remarks and Proposals of the Respondents.

Other proposals or remarks concerning this topic	
From (respondents)	Proposal
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Support in the accreditation process of private universities - permanent consultant from ARACIS for each university.
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	What you want will be very difficult to implement in terms of an extended involvement of stakeholders. A close connection should first be achieved between the needs of the labour market and the higher education provision!
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Avoid excessive bureaucratization that would hinder the education process.
Employer	Set up permanent working groups, per specialities and topics of interest.

Employer	<p>Regarding strengthening the ARACIS structure, the position of Employers, expressed through their representatives, should be taken into account as well; furthermore, the assigning / certification of the employer’s representatives, members in the Consultative Commission, ARACIS Working Group as experts on ARACIS matters. The motivation resides in the fact that the purpose of Higher Education Institutions as Trainers is to create, train, and shape in a specific manner the abilities and the level of professional knowledge that will allow students - future graduates - not only the possibility to get employment but also the possibility to integrate in an efficient, targeted manner in the current activities of the employer, based on a continuous adjustment of the curricula to the needs of the Employers, highlighted by the institutional development policy and strategy.</p> <p>Periodical analysis of the activities and the results (including monitoring + multi-directional feedback + measures/correction/adjustment plan, according to the updated needs).</p>
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Other general proposals or observations/comments on the participation of stakeholders in quality assurance in higher education	
From (respondents)	Proposal
Member, ARACIS National Register of Evaluators	Stakeholders should just be consulted in order to find out what their needs are. Involving them should stop because the universities and ARACIS are professionals by excellence, and they take their mission seriously and create good study programmes and quality standards. So what could the “stakeholders” say?
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	We propose that stakeholders should be defined clearly, and it should be possible to select the stakeholders also based on the confessional specificity of the universities.
Personnel in a Higher Education Institution	Determine and communicate, in a standardized format imposed by the commission and in due time, all the problems that need to be solved by the institution undergoing the verification before the on-site visit. Digitalise the evaluation processes within ARACIS in order to facilitate communication with the evaluated institutions (in the form of a dedicated platform).

Student	<p>The quality of higher education cannot be ensured if this education system is not connected to the reality around (labour market, the characteristics and problems of the current society, the psychological traits and needs of the current student and future professional adult). For instance, I think that perfecting a form of professional mentoring system (with students having as mentors not only professors or other students from the higher study years, but also professionals in the field) in the higher education institutions would be very helpful for the current situation.</p> <p>Furthermore, I believe that the strategies for improving the quality of higher education should be developed while looking at the problems of the pre-university system; the communication between the higher education and the pre-university education systems is essential.</p>
Employer	<p>Regarding strengthening the ARACIS structure, the position of Employers, expressed through their representatives, should be taken into account as well; furthermore, the assigning / certification of the employer's representatives, members in the Consultative Commission, ARACIS Working Group as experts on ARACIS matters. The motivation resides in the fact that the purpose of Higher Education Institutions as Trainers is to create, train, and shape in a specific manner the abilities and the level of professional knowledge that will allow students - future graduates - not only the possibility to get employment but also the possibility to integrate in an efficient, targeted manner in the current activities of the employer, based on a continuous adjustment of the curricula to the needs of the Employers, highlighted by the institutional development policy and strategy.</p> <p>Periodical analysis of the activities and the results (including monitoring + multi-directional feedback + measures/correction/adjustment plan, according to the updated needs).</p>

4.4. Final Conclusions

The results of this analysis are additional solid proof of the value of the ESQA project. The answers received from most academic stakeholders lead to the conclusion that they are interested in learning, accepting and welcoming participation at external quality assurance processes of representatives of more comprehensive categories of non-academic stakeholders. Also, the stakeholders are expecting benefits from this kind of sometimes new experience for the internal quality assurance they should implement at their own HE institutions. The answers to *Proposal VI. 1. The Agency should pay more attention in the evaluation process to the involvement of stakeholders in the internal quality assurance procedures in higher education institutions* seems to be relevant proof in that sense.

At the same time, despite the smaller number of stakeholder respondents from outside the academic community, one can notice a certain lack of information on their expected role, although most of them express their willingness to become involved — moreover, the *Proposal V.3. A core curriculum for training should be developed, eventually recognized as a postgraduate course so that certificates could be issued* was primarily welcomed by representatives of HEIs, although the need for training is evident.

The need for action plans of agencies to take concrete steps in engaging stakeholders was a remarkable conclusion of the ESQA project, and it is supported in the case of ARACIS by the answers to this targeted questionnaire. One of the further proposals coming from an employer shows his/her view on how the involvement of stakeholders should contribute to increasing the quality and relevance of ARACIS activity: “About the strengthening of the ARACIS structure, the position of Employers, expressed through their representatives, should be taken into account as well”.

ARACIS has already taken a first step for implementing the action plan, creating a new position to be staffed with a dedicated person in charge of the relations with stakeholders, with the mission to coordinate the action of all other departments in that sense. The presentation of the action plan and the implementation measures shall be published in QAR in 2022.

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“Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities (ESQA)”, project number 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3_BOLOGNA, was co-funded in the framework of ERASMUS+ Programme of the European Union and the Romanian Ministry of Education (2018-2021), <https://www.aracis.ro/en/esqa-project/>