



Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ARACIS

Self-assessment Report

ENQA Targeted Review

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PART I – BACKGROUND

1. Introduction

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) was created in **2005**, according to the legal provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education¹, approved by the Law no. 87/2006, with subsequent amendments and completions. ARACIS took over the attributions, personnel and assets of the National Council of Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA), founded in **1993**.

ARACIS is an **autonomous public institution established at the national level, with legal personality and self-financed**, with the main purpose of **externally evaluating the quality** of higher education in Romania. ARACIS' mission² is also to contribute, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other relevant institutions, and together with the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), to a **continuous enhancement** of higher education quality at the national level, as well as within the European Higher Education Area.

ARACIS is a **member** of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and has registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2009, the current review being consequently the fourth.

ARACIS is also a **member** of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) and the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA). As a member of the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAEE), ARACIS is authorised to award the **EUR-ACE® Label** for engineering study programs.

The external evaluation of the HEIs is conducted by ARACIS with the purpose of **authorisation (ex-ante) or accreditation (ex-post)**, as well as for **renewal of accreditation** every five years. ARACIS evaluates **study programmes, study domains, institutions** organising doctoral studies (IOSUD) and HEIs, performing an average of **650 evaluations** per year.

In Romania, the higher education system is organised according to the Law of National Education no. 1/2011³.

In the 2021 – 2022 academic year, **83 accredited HEIs**, out of which **53 publicly funded**, and 5 organisations authorised to provide university-level study programs, have organised university studies for **543.299 students**. The proportion of female students was **54,6%**. **26.555** teaching staff have tenure in higher education institutions, out of which

¹ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Emergency-Ordinance-no-75_2005-on-QA_November-2022.pdf

² https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ARACIS-Strategy_2022-2026.pdf

³ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Law-of-National-Education-no-1_2011_November-2022.pdf

13.904 (52,4%) are females⁴. The PhD programmes are also organised by the Romanian Academy.

The number of specialisations and students for each cycle of university studies is presented in the table⁵ below:

Table 1. Number of specialisations and students at each level of higher education in Romania

Cycle / Level	No. of university study programmes	No. of university study domains	No. of students
Bachelor (level 6)	2.537	-	349.414
Master (level 7)	2.783	891	171.580
Doctoral (level 8)	-	427	22.305

2. Development of the self-assessment report (SAR)

The self-assessment report has been elaborated by the team nominated by the ARACIS Council in January 2022. Due to some team members' unavailability, the team's composition was changed in October 2022, as presented in [Annex 1](#).

The team includes representatives of the main stakeholders – students, employers, teachers' unions, as well as representatives of ARACIS Council and the permanent staff. In the same meeting in January 2022, it was decided to be selected standard 2.2. as the area for enhancement, considering the current strategic preoccupation of the Agency.

The self-evaluation process started in May 2022, with different sections being elaborated by the members of the team in collaboration with the relevant staff members. ARACIS Council was periodically informed on the progress of the self-evaluation process and on the different steps of the review preparation. The members of ARACIS Council were invited to contribute to the SWOT analysis preparation and to comment on the SAR, while the final version was approved in a special meeting in December 2022.

The members of the Consultative Commission,⁶ constituted of representatives of the HEIs proposed by the National Council of Rectors (CNR), were also asked to contribute to the report. A meeting also took place with representatives of the Ministry of Education to discuss the content of the report.

⁴ National Institute of Statistics: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#!/pages/tables/insse-table>, accessed November 2022

⁵ ARACIS processing according to Government Decisions 2021/2022 + Eurostat accessed November 2022

⁶ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/consultative-commission/>

3. Changes since the last full review

During the period covered by the current report (December 2017 – November 2022), the following main changes related to the ARACIS' activities, organisation and functioning took place:

- **Application of the ARACIS revised *Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference and the list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*⁷**, approved by the Government Decision no. 915/2017 and published in the Romanian Official Gazette no. 25/ 11.01.2018. The revision aimed to implement the provisions of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* as they were revised in 2015, by including students as members of all evaluation panels, as well as the legal changes in the field of higher education, for example, aspects related to ethics commissions;
- **Online or hybrid activities:**
 - External evaluation procedures realised in **online or hybrid formats**, between May 2020 – March 2022, in the context of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions;
 - Since March 2020, the work of ARACIS Council and the Permanent Speciality Experts' Commissions (PSEC) can take place **online or hybrid**, a measure introduced initially in the pandemic context but also maintained in the present for increased efficiency;
 - Since March 2020, Agency's permanent staff members have been allowed to **work from home**; during the pandemic, this could apply to all employees, or half of them at a time, while currently working from home is allowed by demand;
- Revision, in February 2021, of the **Regulation on the Organization and Operation of ARACIS**⁸, to:
 - establish the structure dedicated to **research activities**;
 - create **compartments** within the Quality Assurance Direction to better organise and coordinate the external evaluation activities: 1) the Programme Accreditation and Evaluation Service, 2) the Institutional Accreditation and Evaluation Service, including the Office for Evaluation of Doctoral Studies, and 3) the Postgraduate Study Programme Accreditation Compartment;
 - **revise the attributions** of each position/ department, also considering better division between strategic and executive roles of each;
- **Enabling the development of joint programmes by exceptions to the general rules** set for study programmes organised by one HEI, **by allowing accreditation using the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes** through modifications to the Law of National Education no. 1/2011 (Emergency Ordinance no. 22/31.03.2021 for the amendment and completion of Law of National Education no. 1/2011 and of Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance of Education);

⁷ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Methodology_2018_EN1.pdf

⁸ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/organization-regulations/>

- Make mandatory for each HEI to have a **dedicated department** in charge of internal quality assurance and allow the increase of the number of **students** members to the internal quality assurance commissions through modification of the Law of National Education no. 1/2011 (Emergency Ordinance no. 22/31.03.2021 for the amendment and completion of the Law of National Education no. 1/2011 and Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance of Education);
- Change of 11 **ARACIS Council members**, starting January **2022**, due to the end of their term of office, as established by the provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/ 2005;
- The number of **permanent staff members increased** from 33, in 2018 to 58, in November 2022, including the appointment of a General Director (acting as Chief Executive Officer) starting January **2022**.

The external reviews activities performed by ARACIS are presented in the table below, mentioning the number of evaluations realised between 2018 – 2022:

Table 2. External evaluation activities

Evaluation activity	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Institutional Evaluation	9	11	6	23	21	70
Programme Authorisation (First Cycle)	42	31	40	47	47	207
Programme Accreditation (First Cycle)	264	358	189	499	434	1.744
Programme Accreditation and awarding of EUR-ACE Label (First Cycle)	5	2	7	5	16	35
Programme Accreditation (Second Cycle)	2	8	5	12	7	34
Study domain Accreditation (Second Cycle)	13	285	146	117	164	725
Evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD)	-	-	-	50	-	50
Study domain Accreditation (Third Cycle)	-	-	-	398	-	398
Study domain Authorisation (Third Cycle)					14	14
TOTAL	335	695	393	1.151	703	3.277

Two international evaluations for renewal of accreditation for law study programmes (one bachelor and one master) in the Republic of Moldova at the "Ștefan cel Mare" Academy of the Internal Affairs Ministry from Chișinău were performed in 2022.

3.1 New external quality assurance activities

From the submission of the previous SAR (in November **2017**) until November **2022**, one type of new external quality assurance (EQA) activity was introduced: the **evaluation of third-cycle (doctoral) university studies**, as established by the Law of National Education no. 1/ 2011, with subsequent amendments and additions, in particular articles 158, 159, and articles 160-170.

The process of evaluation involve the following **steps**:

- a. evaluation of the **organisational framework**, named "the institution organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD)" - periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD);
- b. evaluation of the doctoral **study domains** (DSD) in which the doctoral study programmes are organised - periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains (DSD) and evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain.

The last amendments to the law in the field of quality assurance of doctoral studies were approved in **March 2021** (Emergency Ordinance no. 22/31.03.2021 for the amendment and completion of the Law of National Education no. 1/2011 and of Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance of Education) and at the same time was established that the entire evaluation process should be concluded by the end of the year. In **April 2021**, the *Methodology for evaluation of doctoral studies and the systems of criteria, standards and performance indicators used in the evaluation* was approved, through the Order no. 3651 of 12.04.2021 of the Minister of Education, based on ARACIS proposal. Part I of the ESG was taken into account, ensuring that all applicable standards and guidelines were incorporated into the indicators.

In the same month, the evaluation **Guide** for the renewal of accreditation was approved. Between May and December **2021** were concluded all evaluations of doctoral studies that the HEIs solicited – 398 study domains and 50 institutions.

The doctoral study domains' evaluation is carried out in the view of **accreditation** or for **renewal of accreditation**, while accreditation is awarded in two steps – **authorisation** and **accreditation**.

In **2022**, were evaluated 14 study domains in view of **authorisation** (evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain), the specific **Guide** being approved in February 2022.

Consequently, ARACIS has fulfilled its **role of performing external evaluation in view of accreditation** for all study programmes and domains organised by the Romanian HEIs or other organisations.

PART II – FOCUS AREAS

4. Profile, manner of functioning and EQA activities of the Agency related to the focus areas of Part 3 of the ESG

4.1 ESG Standard 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

Standard:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

This standard was included in the analysis as it was judged as **partially compliant** by the EQAR Register Committee in 2019. Nevertheless, the ENQA review panel considered the standard **substantially compliant**.

Description of the internal quality assurance system

To ensure the quality of the activities and services provided, ARACIS has developed, implemented and maintained an internal quality assurance system which comprises all the activities carried out by the Agency.

The internal quality assurance system is briefly described by the **Internal Quality Assurance Policy**.⁹ The Internal Quality Assurance Policy is also describing the values and principles guarded in ARACIS activities, and the principles and objectives of internal quality assurance processes.

The internal quality assurance processes are interconnected and grouped into two types, as described below:

- **Main (core) processes** — encompassing **management** and external **evaluation activities**

In terms of **management**, ARACIS Council, as a decision-making body, establishes the strategic objectives of the Agency, approves external evaluations results and the composition of the experts' panels and other commissions, defines the internationalisation, communication and partnership policies, approves the budget and the documents of methodological nature (evaluation guides, procedures etc.). In what it concerns the **external evaluation activities**, the internal quality assurance procedures cover different steps of all these activities.

These procedures are set up in accordance with the **national legislation**¹⁰ and the provisions of the **ESG**.

- **Support processes** - processes that support the proper functioning of the main (core) processes

They include procedures implemented to ensure the **proper functioning** of the Agency and its activities: secretariat and archiving, website maintenance, documents and legislation monitoring, administration of human and material resources, administration of accounting and logistics aspects of evaluation services. These procedures are set up in accordance with the **Internal Management Control Standards**¹¹ and are aimed at achieving the objectives and carrying out the activity in an effective and efficient manner.

The two types of processes described above constitute the **Internal Management Control System**, which is continuously developed, revised and systematically implemented.

⁹ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ARACIS_Policy-Declaration-for-internal-quality-assurance.pdf

¹⁰ Law of National Education no. 1/2011 and Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education

¹¹ Established by the Order no. 600/20 April 2018 for the approval of the Internal Management Control Code for public entities (<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/200317>).

The list of procedures developed for the support processes is provided in [Annex 2](#), as it is not public, while the list of regulations and of procedures related to the core processes is included in the **Internal Quality Assurance Policy**, available on the ARACIS website.

The **structures** in charge of the Internal Management Control System are:

- the **Monitoring Commission**¹² - which coordinates the process of updating the general and specific objectives, procedural activities, the risk management process, the performance monitoring system, the status of procedures and of the monitoring and reporting system;
- the **Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office** – where one staff member has attributions dedicated to the development and implementation of internal quality assurance processes.

The composition of the Monitoring Commission is set by the Order no. 600 / 20 April 2018 for the approval of the Internal Management Control Code for public entities, and is constituted from the heads of the institution's departments.

As established by law¹³, in ARACIS is functioning the **Public Audit Compartment**, under the authority of the President, that provides, in an independent and objective manner, **assurances and advice** to the management for the optimal administration of public revenues and expenses, perfecting the activities of the public entity.

The objectives of this structure are:

- a. objective assurance and counselling, intended to improve the systems and activities of the public entity;
- b. supporting the achievement of the public entity's objectives through a systematic and methodical approach, which evaluates and improves the effectiveness of the management system based on risk management, control and administration processes.

Despite several attempts since 2019, due to either lack of candidates, or the suspension of hiring new staff in public institutions, only **an auditor was hired in 2021**. By law, in each public institution should exist two auditors, but at the public contest organised in 2022, no candidates applied. Currently, hiring in public institutions is not allowed until the end of 2022.

Members of the Monitoring Commission, as well as other persons in charge of internal quality assurance activities are regularly participating in training courses.

All Agency activities are conducted in accordance with the provisions of the **Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct**¹⁴, which includes fundamental values, principles, and rules of conduct, together with definitions of possible infringement actions and the analysis and decision mechanisms. Annexes to the Code include declarations of avoiding conflicts of interest in the external evaluation activities, as well as for impartiality, confidentiality and

¹² <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Componenta-Comisiei-de-Monitorizare.pdf>

¹³ Law no. 672/19 December 2002 regarding internal public audit
(<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/40929>)

¹⁴ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ARACIS-Code-of-ethics-and-rules-of-conduct_2017.pdf

competence. ARACIS is working with a large pool of experts, comprising academic experts, national and international, students and employers' representatives, totalling almost 1.500 persons. They should act in accordance with the provisions of the Code.

ARACIS has also developed a **Plan for Gender Equality**¹⁵, within the HORIZON 2020 funded project *Taking a Reflexive Approach to Gender for Institutional Transformation – TARGET* (agreement no. 741672), implemented between 2017 – 2021, aiming to foster **gender equity** in its operations.

Presently, in the ARACIS Council the percentage of women is 30% (6 women and 14 men). In the Executive Board, 1 in five members is a woman (the director of the Accreditation Department). In the 13 PSEC the total percentage of women is 39% (43 women and 67 men), but the repartition is uneven. Regarding the permanent staff, the percentage of women is 71% (41 women and 17 men) and in management positions there are 12 women and 3 men.

Regarding the communication with relevant authorities, within the *"Improving public policies in higher education and enhancing the quality of regulations by updating quality standards - QAFIN"*¹⁶ project was developed **The Procedures Manual regarding the role and competencies** of the Ministry of Education, Ministry's subordinated Commissions and ARACIS in what it concerns quality assurance and collaboration aspects.

Application and revision of internal quality assurance system

Examples of specific activities are:

- the development of the **Multiannual Internal Public Audit Plan** for the years 2022-2024 and of the **Annual Internal Public Audit Plan** for 2022;
- updating the **Internal Public Audit Methodology** and the **Internal Audit Charter**;
- preparing the **action plan** for ensuring and improving the quality of the internal public audit activity and the **monitoring report**;
- drafting the **development plan** and the annual **implementation report** related to the Internal Management Control System;
- developing and updating **operational procedures**;
- oversee the **implementation of procedures**;
- analysing **internal and external feedback** related to ARACIS functioning and activities.

All methodological and procedural documents developed as part of the Internal Management Control System are **consistently applied** in ARACIS activities and periodically revised. The auditor realises **audit missions** to verify the adequate implementation of different procedures, as per the Multiannual Internal Public Audit Plan.

In 2022, according to the Annual Internal Public Audit Plan, a number of **5 internal public audit missions** were carried out so that the Internal Management Control System was

¹⁵ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ARACIS_report_EN.pdf

¹⁶ The project was implemented during May 2017 – October 2021 and was co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Operational Programme "Administrative Capacity" 2014-20204. Details about the project and main results are available here: <http://www.aracis.ro/rezultatele-proiectului-qafin/>.



audited and the following organizational structures: Public Procurement Department, Administrative Office, Human Resources Department and Financial Accounting Service, Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office.

Several **regulations and procedures were developed and/or revised** during 2018-2022, following legislative changes or the need to better answer the Agency's needs.

In February 2021, the **Regulation on the Organization and Operation of ARACIS**¹⁷ was revised following the analysis of the *Recommendation for the Regulation of Organization and Functioning of the Recipient*¹⁸ elaborated by World Bank experts in the framework of the project *Improving public policies in higher education and enhancing the quality of regulations by updating quality standards - QAFIN*, project coordinated by the Ministry of National Education.

The process of developing the Recommendations by the World Bank included an **analysis of organisational needs** conducted through an online survey aimed at collecting views and perceptions of ARACIS employees on a number of areas in organisational and human resources management which have an impact on the overall performance of the institution, such as *recruitment* (staff perceptions of the merit-based recruitment process), *career development* (staff perceptions of promotion and recognition, career mobility and learning opportunities), *motivation* (staff perceptions of motivation and involvement in collaboration with colleagues and partners), *setting organisational objectives* (staff perceptions of the extent to which management sets institutional objectives and tracks progress towards achieving these objectives), *individual performance management* (the extent to which staff are recognised for contributing to the achievement of the institution's objectives; the extent to which management appreciates and encourages teamwork) and *skills* (the degree to which staff occupy positions appropriate to their abilities). Also, qualitative interviews were conducted with the Executive Board and administrative staff representatives to identify procedural gaps in the current organisational flow and the needs and areas for improvement. The *Regulation on the Organization and Operation of ARACIS* was further revised in 2022 to ensure the correlation with national legislative provisions for public institutions.

The ARACIS Council **external evaluation decisions** are based on the activity of PSEC. A member of the PSEC coordinates the panel of experts for each program/domain of university studies review; the experts' reports are discussed by the PSEC and consequently proposes the decision to ARACIS Council, together with the main experts' panel findings. The PSEC president presents each evaluation in the ARACIS Council meeting.

¹⁷ <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Regulation-on-the-Organization-and-Operation-of-ARACIS.pdf>

¹⁸ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/P157508-Output-6_Eng.pdf

The PSEC members are **selected** according to specific procedures¹⁹. Their activity is conducted according to the *Regulation on the Organization and Operation*²⁰ and the *Appointment procedure of evaluation panel members*²¹ within the EQA processes.

Moreover, the activity of each PSEC is **coordinated** by one or two representatives of the ARACIS Council and is **supported** by a member of the permanent staff.

Stakeholders feedback mechanisms

Stakeholders' involvement is one focus area for ARACIS activities. Within the project *The Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities (ESQA)*²² (607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3-BOLOGNA), co-financed by the ERASMUS+ Programme, implemented in collaboration with Ministry of Education, ARACIS has developed an **Action plan**²³ aiming to enhance involvement of stakeholders, to be implemented between 2021-2022.

External feedback received from representatives of HEIs, as well as from other stakeholders, on the external evaluation process and the activity of ARACIS panels of expert evaluators is a core component in performance and quality management, aiming at the continuous improvement of ARACIS activities.

Since 2021, improvements have been achieved regarding the method of distribution of **questionnaires and collecting feedback** by using a survey platform which assures the confidentiality of answers, facilitates the completion process and the overall centralising of answers and analysis of feedback. The permanent staff members coordinating the respective evaluations send the questionnaires to HEIs after the evaluation site visit is completed; the analysis of feedback is conducted by the Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office and the Research Office, which subsequently elaborate an annual report. In the majority, the respondents **appreciate** that procedures are carried out strictly respecting the Methodology and Guides, by experts acting with professionalism and impartiality. They also praised the **objectiveness** of the evaluation outcomes and the procedure's **usefulness** in enhancing the quality of education in their institutions. The critical points raised are **considered and discussed** during meetings with representatives of the PSEC, training for experts or the revision of different procedures. Such **critical** issues are related to the behaviour of some experts looking mainly to negative aspects or reporting the situation to that in their institution, high level of bureaucracy and procedures too complicated or irrelevance of certain recommendations.

¹⁹ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/specialty-commissions/>
https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ARACIS-Procedure-for-selection-and-appointment-of-members-of-evaluation-panels_professors.pdf
https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ARACIS-Procedure-for-selection-and-appointment-of-members-of-evaluation-panels_students.pdf
https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ARACIS-Procedure-for-selection-and-appointment-of-members-of-evaluation-panels_employers-representatives.pdf

²⁰ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ARACIS-Regulation-on-the-operation-of-PSEC_2017.pdf

²¹ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ARACIS-Procedure-for-the-appointment-of-members-of-evaluation-panels_bachelor-programmes-and-master-domains.pdf

²² <https://esqa.ro/>

²³ https://esqa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/WP6_Diagnose-reports.pdf

Implementation of recommendations and considerations

The ENQA Review Panel's recommendation and EQAR Register Committee considerations have referred for this standard to:

- **the need to provide searchable digital copies of evaluation reports to the members of its Permanent Specialty Commissions and other committees in advance of meetings where such reports are discussed;**

Since mid-2019 ARACIS introduced the ownCloud²⁴ platform for document management, used both by ARACIS staff and members of different bodies (ARACIS Council, PSEC), as well as by HEIs and experts which can directly upload documents for external evaluation procedures (e.g. for the external evaluation of doctoral studies, in 2021). As presented in the Follow-up Report submitted to ENQA in September 2020, searchable digital copies of evaluation reports are available in ARACIS Cloud²⁵ as soon as they are finalised by the panels. Thus, the PSEC and ARACIS Council members can consult them at any time before the meetings. A summary of the PSEC reports containing the main findings is also available for each evaluation.

The ARACIS Cloud is also used by the permanent staff, who share various documents organised in specific categories (Internal procedures, Human Resources documents, Legislative provisions, National Register of Evaluators etc.). Access to the Cloud is controlled to respect data security, sharing and publication under applicable laws and regulations.

- **The hiring process of new staff to support the Agency's IQA procedures has yet to be finalised;**

As presented above, 2 members of ARACIS staff are currently in charge of internal quality assurance procedures, as well as the head of the Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office. One auditor still has to be hired to fulfil the legal requirements.

- **The changes to the IQA have yet to be implemented in practice;**

All aspects related to the internal quality assurance processes are implemented in practice. Several procedures are under revision, while others are yet to be developed, but this is a system in continuous evolution, so to adapt to ARACIS activities and changing legislation.

- **The documentation on previous external evaluations and recommendations can be found on the ARACIS website; reports can be found using keywords, however the content of reports cannot be searched by keywords;**

On the new website of the Agency, developed in 2019, review reports²⁶ can be found through the introduction of a functional search field. Filters that allow users to search review reports in a user-friendly manner and enhances the accessibility of information are available. The review results can be filtered by HEI's name, faculty name, field of study,

²⁴ ownCloud is an open-source file sync and share software which provides a safe, secure, and compliant file synchronization and sharing solution

²⁵ <https://cloud.aracis.ro/owncloud/index.php/login>

²⁶ https://www.aracis.ro/evaluari_licenta/

study programme, depending on the type of the external evaluation activity. Moreover, the reports are up-loaded in a **searchable** format.

The review reports are available to an international audience as they are periodically uploaded to **EQAR's Database of External Quality Assurance Results**²⁷ (DEQAR). In November 2022, DEQAR included 3.496 reports on 92 HEIs, uploaded by ARACIS.

Analysis

ARACIS has developed and is implementing a **comprehensive internal quality assurance system**, considering both provisions of national legislation and of the ESG, both for the external quality assurance procedures and the support processes. Dedicated **structures** and **people** are in place, in charge of developing, revising and overseeing the Internal Quality Assurance System.

ARACIS Council members, the executive management and members of permanent staff are **dedicated to maintaining high-quality standards** in their activities.

Nevertheless, the implementation of such a complex system requires **efforts** from all members of ARACIS. Consequently, it should be **relevant** and **evidently help the implementation** of activities, in order to make them worthwhile and keep people **engaged**.

In procedures development, the **opinions and feedback** of persons that will implement them are to be better considered by increased cooperation and communication between departments. There are situations where even if regulated by procedures, the activities are implemented according to practices in place and not by the provisions of procedures, which are considered too complicated and difficult to operationalise.

Even if constantly collected, the written **feedback** of external stakeholders is often mostly positive, so not entirely useful for the improvement of activities.

The work of the permanent staff, PSEC and ARACIS Council would be significantly simplified and improved by the use of an **electronic platform** to manage the external quality assurance procedures. Even if such platform was developed within the QAFIN project, it could not be operationalised so far because of a lack of IT specialists to perform the adaptations needed for different procedures.

In general, even if in the last years the Agency managed to hire personnel, in some areas where the salaries are higher on the market – like audit or informatics, this was not possible. Moreover, in order to maintain the personnel with actual **salary levels**, efforts are made to provide a stimulating professional environment.

Further developments

Further looking, the following areas for improvement are envisaged:

- **hire** one additional auditor, subject to public contests allowance;
- **revision of some procedures** in view of simplification and better adaptation to the needs of the Agency;
- the **digitalisation** of activities;

²⁷ <https://www.eqar.eu/ga-results/search/by-institution/?country=141>

- improving collecting mechanisms and analysing **feedback** from the expert panel members and HEI representatives;
- collecting and analysing **feedback** from the Agency's permanent staff.

5. Design and implementation of the Agency's EQA activities related to the focus areas of Part 2 of the ESG

5.1 ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

Following the previous external review, the ENQA Board concluded that ARACIS is **substantially compliant** with ESG 2.1. Also, the Register Committee of EQAR concluded that ARACIS demonstrated **compliance** with ESG 2.1.

The ESG standards 1.1 to 1.10 continue to be addressed through the external quality assurance activities as it has been before, as no major change has been registered since the last review. In the following, we will outline how **evaluation of third-cycle (doctoral) university studies** addresses the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG. Therefore, the **mapping grid** includes only the newly introduced external quality assurance activity which addresses the **evaluation of third-cycle (doctoral) university studies**²⁸:

- periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral studies (IOSUD) - introduced in May 2021;
- periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains [study domain renewal of accreditation (third-cycle)] - introduced in May 2021;
- evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain [study domain authorisation (third-cycle)] - introduced in March 2022.

The domains and criteria for external quality evaluations are established in art. 10 of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance of Education.

The standards and indicators for the evaluation of doctoral studies are set by the *Methodology for evaluation of doctoral studies and the systems of criteria, standards and performance indicators used in the evaluation*, approved through the Order no. 3651 of 12.04.2021 of the Minister of Education at ARACIS proposal.

ARACIS is giving the **outmost importance to the internal quality** assurance mechanisms in place at HEIs level. As acknowledged by Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 and the *Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference*

²⁸ <https://www.aracis.ro/self-assesment-report-guide-doctoral-evaluation/>

and the list of performance indicators of ARACIS, the quality of education is primarily the responsibility of the institutions.

One domain of external evaluation, described by nine criteria, is **Quality management**. In the case of doctoral studies, this domain is analysed through a maximum of 18 criteria for the IOSUD evaluation.

Table 3 presents the mapping grid of indicators reported to Part 1 of the ESG, while [Annex 3](#) presents a detailed version of the mapping grid.

Table 3. Compliance of the newly introduced EQA with standards of Part 1 of the ESG

ESG Part 1	Evaluation of IOSUD			Evaluation of DSD		
	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators
1.1	A.1	A.1.1	A.1.1.1 A.1.1.2	A.1	A.1.1	A.1.1.1 A.1.1.2
	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.1 C.1.1.2 C.1.1.3	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.1 C.1.1.2
1.2	A.1	A.1.1	A.1.1.1 A.1.1.3	A.1	A.1.1	A.1.1.1
	B.2	B.2.1	B.2.1.1 B.2.1.2	B.2	B.2.1	B.2.1.1 B.2.1.2 B.2.1.5*
1.3	B.2	B.2.1	B.2.1.3	B.2	B.2.1	B.2.1.3
	B.3	B.3.1	B.3.1.1			B.2.1.4*
	B.4	B.4.1	B.4.1.1	B.3	B.3.1	B.3.1.1* B.3.1.2*
1.4	A.1	A.1.1	A.1.1.1	A.1	A.1.1	A.1.1.1
	B.1	B.1.1.	B.1.1.1 B.1.1.2	B.1	B.1.1 B.1.2	B.1.1.1* B.1.2.1
	B.3	B.3.1	B.3.1.1	B.3	B.3.1	B.1.2.2*
	B.4	B.4.1	B.4.1.1		B.3.2	B.3.1.1*
	C.4	C.4.1	C.4.1.1 C.4.1.2 C.4.1.3 C.4.1.4 C.4.1.5 C.4.1.6 C.4.1.7			B.3.1.2* B.3.2.1* B.3.2.2*
1.5	A.3	A.3.1	A.3.1.1 A.3.1.2	A.3	A.3.1	A.3.1.1 A.3.1.2
	C.3	C.3.1	C.3.1.1 C.3.1.2 C.3.1.3 C.3.1.4		A.3.2	A.3.1.3 A.3.1.4* A.3.2.1 A.3.2.2
				C.3	C.3.1	C.3.1.1* C.3.1.2* C.3.1.3*

ESG Part 1	Evaluation of IOSUD			Evaluation of DSD		
	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators
1.6	A.1	A.1.2	A.1.2.1	A.1	A.1.2	A.1.2.1
	A.2	A.2.1	A.1.2.2		A.1.3	A.1.2.2
			A.2.1.1			A.1.3.1*
			A.2.1.2			A.1.3.2*
			A.2.1.3			A.1.3.3*
	B.2	B.2.1	B.2.1.3	A.2	A.2.1	A.2.1.1
	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.1	B.2	B.2.1	B.2.1.3
	C.2	C.2.2	C.2.2.1	B.3	B.3.2	B.2.1.4*
			C.2.2.2			B.3.2.1*
			C.2.2.3	C.1	C.1.1	B.3.2.2*
			C.2	C.2.2	C.1.1.1	
					C.1.1.2	
					C.2.2.1	
					C.2.2.2	
					C.2.2.3	
1.7	A.1	A.1.2	A.1.2.1	A.1	A.1.2	A.1.2.1
			A.1.2.2			A.1.2.2
C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1	
1.8	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1
1.9	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.4	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.2

The indicators marked with * do not apply to the establishment of a new DSD, as are referring to learning, teaching and research processes that already took place.

5.2 ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

The 2.2 standard has been judged **substantially compliant** by the ENQA review panel, respectively **compliant** by EQAR Register Committee in the last evaluation.

Taking into account that the quality assurance system in Romania has functioned following similar principles in the last 17 years since ARACIS was founded, ARACIS Council has started reflecting on whether its activities and methodologies continue to be fit for purpose. Consequently, standard 2.2 was selected as an area for enhancement. It is essential to underline that the main features of the quality assurance system are set by law, but we still believe that ARACIS has a vital role in proposing changes.

Quality assurance has to be analysed in the national context, observing the higher education system's evolution and level of development. In 2005, in Romania were functioning 107 higher education institutions, out of which 52 were private. The highest number of students was registered in 2007, only for Bachelor level **907.353 students, 41.93%** in private institutions. In 2021 the number of private institutions decreased by **17**, while the number of students in private institutions at the bachelor level decreased by **85%**²⁹.

Description of quality assurance methodological framework

The external evaluation of the quality of education is done ex-ante (authorisation) and ex-post (accreditation) as well as periodically, every five years, for renewal of accreditation. The evaluation is being done for every study programme/domain, all cycles, and at institutional level. Moreover, the evaluation is done separately for the same study programme for different geographical locations, languages or forms of delivery. The outcome of the evaluation process is not only to grant accreditation but also to set the maximum number of students to be annually enrolled.

All these aspects are fixed by law, either the Law of National Education no. 1/2011³⁰ or the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance of Education.

This comprehensive quality assurance was set to answer to the unprecedented expansion in the number of students and private institutions. In particular, one private institution registered in 2005 – 2006 an astounding number of students to specialisations not authorised for distance education.

In the application of the legal provisions, ARACIS has elaborated its methodologies, approved by:

- **Government Decision - Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference and the list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**³¹, by Government Decision no. 915/2017;

The Methodology describes **general principles of quality assurance** in higher education in Romania, including European reference, institutional responsibility and self-evaluation, institutional identity and diversity, cooperation with stakeholders in internal and external quality assurance, focus on results and quality improvement, and transparency. **Standards and indicators** are defined for institutional evaluation and study programmes at the bachelor and master levels, mainly considering the need to assure the academic community, the beneficiaries and the public that the accredited institution satisfies minimum quality standards. Moreover, it is fostered the commitment of the institution to the continuous development of academic quality, proven by learning and research outcomes.

²⁹ Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, accessed December 2022

³⁰ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Law-of-National-Education-no-1_2011_November-2022.pdf

³¹ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Methodology_2018_EN1.pdf; the previous version was approved in October 2006 – by Government Decision no.1418 and is available here: Hotararea-1418_2006-pentru-aprobarea-Metodologiei-de-evaluare-externa-a-standardelor-a-standardelor-de-referinta-si-a.pdf (aracis.ro)

Considering all aspects of HEIs functioning and the need to strengthen internal quality assurance processes, a framework of domains, criteria, standards and indicators is in place, as presented in table 4.

Table 4. Framework of domains, criteria, standards and indicators

Evaluation framework (institutions, bachelor study programmes and master study domains)				Approved by:
DOMAINS			TOTAL	
A. Institutional Capacity	B. Educational Effectiveness	C. Quality Management	3	GEO 75/2005
Criteria				GEO 75/2005
2	4	9	15	
Standards				GD 915/2017
3	5	9	17	
Performance indicators				GD 915/2017
11	16	19	46	
Performance indicators for the evaluation of institutions				ARACIS Council
49	36	27	112	
Performance indicators for the evaluation of bachelor programmes				ARACIS Council
46	57	23	126	
Performance indicators for the evaluation of master domains				ARACIS Council
28	55	8	91	

- Ministerial Order - *Methodology on conducting the evaluation of university doctoral studies* approved by Ministerial Order no. 3651/ 2021.

When developing the indicators, were tackled **aspects that need to be improved** at the level of doctoral studies in Romania, as resulting from the discussions with the stakeholders, but also in terms of **public perception**; for example, better support and guidance devoted to the doctoral student; research activity of PhD coordinators; access to research infrastructure and dedicated funds to support the acquisition of supplies; fostering internationalisation; respecting academic integrity; qualitative analysis of research outcomes; internal quality assurance. A total of **35** indicators are applied to the periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains (DSD), **20** to evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain, and respectively **36** to periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes.

The methodologies also describe the main **evaluation steps** and requirements for the composition of evaluation panels. **Recommendations**, possible **outcomes** and **follow-up processes** are defined as well.

Considering that the evaluation process started immediately after approval of the Methodology, for some indicators that do not operationalise law requirements, for example, the HEIs were given **three years** to fulfil them³². Nevertheless, through the Guides, ARACIS has established several **critical indicators**; in case one of those indicators

³² Examples of indicators that do not operationalise law requirements *A.1.3.2, *A.1.3.3., *A.3.1.2., *A.3.2.2., *B.1.2.1., *C1.1.2. from Ministerial Order no. 3651/2021.

is judged to be not fulfilled, usually, the decision is of non-accreditation, based on a holistic analysis.

To operationalise the evaluation processes based on the methodologies presented above, ARACIS has developed **Guides** for each type of evaluation, approved by the ARACIS Council and shown in [Annex 4](#).

The Guides describe **evaluation steps** and **timelines** and include recommendations for the structure of the **self-evaluation report**, **external evaluation reports template** and the site visit **schedule**, thus making the evaluation process easier to implement and more transparent for the HEIs. They also further describe the **follow-up processes** – in the case of doctoral studies, are mandatory in all cases of outcomes, be they positive or negative decisions, while for the other types of evaluations, follow-up is mandatory mainly for non-accreditation decisions or in the case of a significant number of partially compliant indicators. In the case of non-accreditation decisions, the external evaluation is repeated after one or two years, while if it is an accreditation decision, with a large number of partially compliant indicators, the institution submits a report explaining the implementation of recommendations.

In the case of institutional, bachelor and master-level evaluations, the Guides also further describe the **indicators**.

For the doctoral studies, the Guide establishes the indicators to be used for **authorisation** (evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain), selected from those used for accreditation. Moreover, the outcomes are further described, and **conditions** related to the number of partial or non-fulfilled indicators for awarding different types of decisions are included.

Specific standards for the scientific fields³³, elaborated by the PSEC with the consultation of HEIs, are also in place, aiming to assure the coherence between specialisations in the same study domain.

The process of **revision of the current evaluation framework** was started within the QAFIN project, that was implemented between 2017 and 2021. A draft document³⁴ was developed with support from World Bank experts.

In **2022**, the Ministry of Education elaborated a **new proposal of law** on higher education and quality assurance. In this context, ARACIS has made several **proposals**, both regarding the external quality assurance activities and processes and the Agency's status, organisation and functioning. The consolidated version of the draft law is yet to be provided by the Ministry of Education to assess the impact on ARACIS' activity.

Involvement of stakeholders

Stakeholders are consistently involved in the elaboration and revision of methodologies and guides.

³³ <https://www.aracis.ro/standarde-specifice-evaluare-licenta/>

³⁴ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Nov_2019_Output-3.1_draft_External_Evaluation_Methodology__Revised_final_English1.pdf

The Methodology for evaluating doctoral studies resulted from a **co-creation process**; a working group with representatives of the Ministry of Education, CNR, HEIs consortia, students and teachers' unions was set, focusing primarily on the indicators and the values attached to them. The intermediate **versions were made public** on the ARACIS website and discussed in several CNR meetings. All higher education institutions as well as other stakeholders were invited to send comments.

The **consultation process** for the new draft methodology, applicable for institutional, bachelor and master-level evaluations, within QAFIN project, included: piloting in 5 HEIs, discussions in 5 workshops and consultation through ARACIS website. A consultation report was developed by World Bank experts.

Feedback from the HEI is consistently gathered after each procedure of external evaluation, and annual reports are elaborated. The conclusions are considered for further revisions of methodologies and procedures.

Implementation of recommendations and considerations

➤ focus on student-centeredness and learning outcomes

ARACIS methodologies include several **performance indicators that address student-centred learning and learning outcomes**, for example:

PI.A.2.1.3. Adequate financial resources for teaching and learning activities, adequate support services that are easily accessible to students;

PI.B.2.1.4. Student-centered learning methods;

PI.C.3.1.2. Evaluation as part of developing learning and teaching processes, at course and study programme level

PI.C.5.1.2. Teaching as a learning resource.

Correspondence between requirements of the qualifications and expected learning outcomes is an element of the performance indicator PI.C.2.1.2 (*Correspondence between diplomas and qualifications*), and the achieved learning outcomes are included in the performance indicators PI.C.3.1.1 (*The HEI has regulations for student examination and grading which are rigorously and consistently applied.*) and PI.C.3.1.2. (*Integration of evaluation in the teaching and learning plan (curriculum), by courses and study programs*).

In the Methodology for evaluation of doctoral studies domains, **learning outcomes** are addressed by indicator PI.B.2.1.3. *The IOSUD has mechanisms to ensure that the academic training program based on advanced university studies addresses "the learning outcomes", specifying the knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy that doctoral students should acquire after completing each discipline or through the research activities.*

During June **2022** meeting with the representatives of the PSEC, the focus on assessing learning outcomes was underlined.

The National Authority for Qualifications (ANC)³⁵, together with the Ministry of Education are responsible with the development of a **methodology** concerning the identification,

³⁵ <http://www.anc.edu.ro/>

evaluation and recognition of **learning outcomes**. ARACIS was invited to participate in this process, and a **working group** was created within the Agency. A first draft is available³⁶, and during **2022 consultations** with representatives of higher education institutions in all university centres took place.

Increased **focus on learning outcomes** in external evaluation of study programmes is a direction of strategic³⁷ development for ARACIS.

➤ **focus on enhancement**

In the conditions of the current legal framework, ARACIS was preoccupied with increasing the focus on enhancement in its procedures.

For all procedures, it is mandatory to elaborate **recommendations** for each indicator, when it is the case, rather than general ones at the end of the report. Moreover, the newly introduced evaluation of doctoral studies includes **follow-up procedures**, and in case of accreditation decisions, these are focused on support for implementing recommendations.

➤ **analysis of the costs and the level of workload to higher education institutions and other interested parties of the current Romanian higher education quality assurance system**

The **costs** of external evaluations have increased by 10% in the last 17 years, while the public funds allocated per student increased between 2015 and 2020³⁸ by 2.7 times.

Under the current legal framework, the HEIs are subject to a comprehensive framework of evaluation. **Simplification** was introduced in **2012** when it was decided that the evaluation for the master cycle is done at cluster level. Moreover, in **2018**, accredited HEIs were exempted from the authorisation step in case of master programmes or doctoral domains organised in domains accredited at the master level. Starting **2022**, the external evaluation at IOSUD level will be realised within the institutional evaluation.

Nevertheless, **the workload for the HEIs remains significant**. The evaluation sheet and annexes used for study programmes and institutional evaluation were recently revised in order to simplify the procedures. The number of indicators for the newly introduced evaluations has decreased notably, from 126 to 35.

Further simplifications could be introduced within a revised legal framework.

Analysis

Based on the current methodological framework, **ARACIS has fulfilled its primary mission**, which is the external evaluation in the view of accreditation of study programmes and institutions. Guarantees are in place that minimum quality standards are respected. The internal quality assurance mechanisms at the HEIs level were strengthened.

In the last 15 years, all HEIs have passed **three cycles of external evaluation**, both at institutional and programme level. In the last 5 years, the **proportion of non-accreditation**

³⁶ http://www.anc.edu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2.RR_metodologie-LO-propunere-29-august-2.pdf

³⁷ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/strategy/>

³⁸ Source: http://www.cnfis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/raport_public_2020.pdf

decisions ranges between 0.8% to 8.5%, depending on the type of procedure. So, the question is if all these evaluations are still relevant.

Analysing **91 to 126 indicators** for institutional evaluations and those at bachelor and master levels requires considerable work for ARACIS experts and the HEIs. We might see some indicators **overlap** between programmes and institutional evaluations; other aspects might also be **checked by other institutions** – like the Ministry of Education or the Court of Accounts. Some **indicators** relating to infrastructure or the legal status of institutions, especially public ones, can't change from one evaluation to the next.

The **feedback** gathered from HEIs also shows that the level of work is appreciated as high by some respondents. Moreover, more focus could lie on aspects related to learning and teaching, which is the primary purpose of quality assurance processes.

Some provisions of the specific standards are seen to breach the HEIs autonomy regarding **the content** of study programs.

On the other hand, **high expectations** from the public authorities and stakeholders lie on ARACIS to not allow for study programmes or institutions which do not respect all legal requirements and quality standards to function.

Since **2019**, ARACIS has started a reflection process on directions of a more profound reform of the quality assurance system. Feedback from HEIs was gathered through the abovementioned consultations, but also from the CNR meetings that Agency representatives regularly attend, workshops and seminars.

Future developments

ARACIS's proposals for changing the current legal framework aim to **simplify and increase the relevance of procedures**, especially for well-performing institutions.

Such measures are introducing **audit** as an alternative for institutional evaluation, and **simplified** procedures tailored to the mission and directions of development of each HEIs. The **criteria were also revised** to respond to the current developments in higher education and to a more diversified mission of universities.

As soon as the new legal framework is adopted, the Agency could propose a new evaluation methodology and revised Guides. The main objectives would be **reducing the number of indicators** and **focusing on relevant aspects** in the remit of quality assurance, moving the focus towards **outcomes** of educational processes, the **internal quality assurance processes** and **enhancement**.

Another direction for simplification, which requires collaboration between institutions that gather data from HEIs, would be **using data** already available in different databases and not asking for such information at each evaluation.

5.3 ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

The 2.3 standard has been judged **fully compliant** by the ENQA review panel, respectively **compliant** by EQAR Register Committee in the last evaluation, so the report refers only to the evaluation of doctoral studies.

To ensure adequate implementation of the *Methodology on conducting the evaluation of university doctoral studies*, but also to support HEIs in this new EQA activity, ARACIS developed evaluation **Guides**³⁹, as follows:

- Guide on conducting the process of renewal of accreditation of DSD;
- Guide on conducting the process of External Evaluation of IOSUD (accreditation and renewal of accreditation);
- Guide on conducting the process for setting up (establishment) of a new DSD (authorisation).

Description of evaluation steps

The Methodology and the Guides are available on the Agency's website, and they clearly describe the whole external quality assurance process which is briefly presented below:

- **Self-assessment** process at the level of HEI, concluded with an internal evaluation report developed according to the structure provided in the Guide, which is uploaded in the ARACIS ownCloud (in digital format);
- The expert panel's members **analyse the internal evaluation report** and request clarifications/ additional information (if the case);
- The expert panel carries out a 2-4 days **evaluation site visit** to the institution, that includes visits to **the education/ research premises and facilities and discussions/ interviews with representatives of students, academic staff, management, structures in charge with internal quality assurance, ethics commission, graduates, employers, and other stakeholders**;
- The expert panel drafts **the external evaluation report**, containing the findings from the evaluation process, as well as recommendations for enhancing future activity of the respective domain/ IOSUD;
- **The external evaluation report is sent to the education provider (i.e., IOSUD) for comments and factual errors**;

³⁹ <https://www.aracis.ro/self-assesment-report-guide-doctoral-evaluation/>

- The **final version of the external evaluation report**, together with **comments** received from the HEI, is **analysed in the PSEC** (in the case of the evaluation of DSD) and **in the ARACIS' Department of External Quality Evaluation** (in the case of the evaluation of IOSUD); a proposal for resolution is issued in both cases;
- The **ARACIS Council analyses the proposed resolution and takes the final decision**, which is communicated to the **evaluated institution**, to the **Ministry of Education** and published on the Agency's website.
- **Follow-up evaluation activities** are in place for all evaluations but differentiated according to the outcomes of each of the procedures: in the case of a non-accreditation outcome, the follow-up will be done in one year and consists of a similar process as the initial one, while for an accreditation decision, the follow-up is done in 3 years and is enhancement-oriented.

All three types of evaluations described above follow the same steps. Preparatory sessions with the higher education institutions' representatives were organised in order to discuss the evaluation steps, as well as the use of ARACIS Cloud for uploading the evaluation documents.

For this first round of procedures, to be able to finalise all evaluations by the end of **2021** as established by law, for each HEI, **the evaluation at the IOSUD level and for all DSD took place simultaneously**. The process was assisted by either a member of ARACIS permanent staff or an expert evaluator from the pool, acting as technical secretary.

After each evaluation, online feedback questionnaires were applied to the evaluated institutions.

Analysis

The evaluation processes are defined in the evaluation guides, available on the ARACIS website and discussed in meetings with HEIs representatives. They are consistently applied.

Finalising in **less than one year almost 450 evaluations for doctoral studies** was a significant success for the Agency that meant a lot of effort.

Nevertheless, the **deadlines set could not always be respected**, mainly due to the limited availability of experts and the high workload. Sometimes, the same expert was delegated to two evaluations at the same time, so they had to be replaced later.

There were situations where the participants in **meetings** were unwilling to engage in debates, so not much information could be extracted. In other cases, too **much time was spent answering questions from international evaluators** related to general aspects of the higher education system in Romania.

The **large number of meetings** established in the evaluation guides was sometimes difficult to organise, and information and people joining might have overlapped.

The use of the **Cloud and documents exclusively in electronic format** was appreciated by HEIs and experts and simplified the work of ARACIS permanent staff.

Further developments

The following process of evaluation for renewal of accreditation will be scheduled over a **larger time span**. The evaluation at IOSUD level will be organised within the institutional evaluation process, leading to further simplification.

The **deadlines** for different steps in the evaluation process could be enlarged, so more time would be allocated for experts, especially international ones, to get familiar with the higher education system and, of course, the content of the self-evaluation report.

The use of the digital evaluation platform will further simplify the work of all those involved and allow for better allocation of experts.

5.4 ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

The 2.4 standard has been judged **fully compliant** by the ENQA review panel, respectively **compliant** by EQAR Register Committee in the last evaluation, so the report refers only to the doctoral studies evaluation.

Description of experts' panels composition

The experts' panel consists of **national experts** - academics and doctoral students, and **international experts**.

The experts' panel for external evaluation of **IOSUD** includes:

- one member of the ARACIS Council (with the role of methodological coordination);
- one expert evaluator (academic staff and doctoral advisor, member of the National Register of Evaluators - RNE), acting as coordinator of the evaluation process;
- one doctoral student (member of the National Register of Evaluators for Students);
- one expert evaluator for each of the fundamental science domains of the evaluated IOSUD (academic staff and doctoral advisor, member of the RNE);
- one international expert (member of the International Register of Evaluators).

The experts' panel for external evaluation of **DSD** includes:

- one or two expert evaluators (academic staff and doctoral advisor in the same DSD as the one undergoing evaluation, member of the RNE);
- one international expert (member of the International Register of Evaluators);
- one doctoral student (member of the National Register of Evaluators for Students).

All experts are members of the ARACIS **National Register of Evaluators**⁴⁰. The Register was updated with information on whether the experts are **doctoral coordinators**.

⁴⁰ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/national-register-of-evaluators/>

The Register members are selected based on **open calls**, following specific **procedures** and **criteria**, differentiated on the type of evaluator⁴¹ and publicly available. In addition, to be admitted to the RNE, national academics and students must pass a **test**. A **dedicated call for international experts** was launched in 2021⁴², as a large number of experts from different scientific fields is needed. Currently, in RNE are registered **952** national academics, out of which **516** doctoral coordinators, **294** international academic experts, **241** students and **105** employers.

The External Quality Evaluation Department (for external evaluation of IOSUD) or Accreditation Department (for external evaluation of DSD) **appoints** the expert panel members based on proposals of the PSEC and according to the procedure in place for bachelor and master-level evaluations⁴³.

RNE includes experts from different HEIs as, by law, they have to be professors or associate professors; however, they act in their personal capacity as independent experts. A mechanism of no conflict of interest, implemented by the Agency in accordance with the provisions of the *Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct*⁴⁴ is in place. Moreover, the HEIs could ask for the replacement of an expert, based on arguments, if doubts related to possible conflicts of interest are raised.

Dedicated training and consultation sessions on the new evaluation Methodology and guides were organised for members of the PSEC (**February** and **March 2021**), national expert evaluators (**March 2021**), and for students (**March** and **July 2021**). Before each evaluation mission, online training for experts panels members is organised, with the participation of all experts (for IOSUD and DSD).

Analysis

ARACIS uses quite a **vast register of experts** from different backgrounds, constituted according to the law and own procedures. The **selection process is transparent** and **adapted** to the experts' profile, using **criteria** that assure they have the needed competencies.

The evaluation of doctoral studies was the first time ARACIS involved international experts in evaluating study domains, implying the use of many experts from different scientific fields. In this case, the **international dimension was considered mandatory**, with the research activities predominant in the third cycle.

The experts were provided in advance with the **needed information**, including more general related to the higher education system in Romania and the legal framework, and training sessions were organised. Moreover, **the process was assisted** by either a member of ARACIS permanent staff or an expert evaluator from the pool, acting as a technical secretary.

⁴¹ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ARACIS-Procedure-for-the-selection-of-international-evaluators_Dec-2020-corectat.pdf

⁴² <https://www.enqa.eu/news/aracis-launches-a-call-for-international-evaluators/>

⁴³ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/specialty-commissions/>

⁴⁴ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ARACIS-Code-of-ethics-and-rules-of-conduct_2017.pdf

Although some of the international experts had already experienced participating in institutional evaluations, the vast majority **did not know the Romanian higher education system**. Thus, it has been learned that the **lack of an in-depth understanding** might lead to the loss of valuable observations or recommendations to improve the university's activity that the international evaluator could have offered.

Further developments

Considering the amount of work, the **composition** of experts' panels in the view of renewal of accreditation will be modified to include two experts evaluators. This measure is already implemented for the authorisation (evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain) procedures.

Training will be provided for international experts, with improved content on aspects regarding the organisation and functioning of the Romanian HEIs.

The full implementation of the new **digital platform** for experts will allow for better monitoring of the Register. It will also provide information on the involvement of experts in current and past procedures.

5.5 ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

The 2.5 standard has been judged **fully compliant** by the ENQA review panel, respectively **compliant** by EQAR Register Committee in the last evaluation, so the report refers only to the doctoral studies evaluations.

Description of criteria and decision mechanisms

The external evaluation of the third-cycle (doctoral) university studies is realised based on **explicit and published criteria, standards and performance indicators** described in the Annexes to Ministerial Order no. 3651: for **DSD** included in Annex No. 2⁴⁵ and for **IOSUD** in Annex No. 3⁴⁶. In the case of the evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain, the Guide establishes the indicators to be used, selected from those used for DSD. These are **applied consistently** to all evaluations performed, all leading to a formal decision.

The experts' panels judge the degree of fulfilment of indicators based on the **information from the self-evaluation report** and the **findings** during the site visit. The indicators can be appreciated as **fulfilled, partially fulfilled or non-fulfilled**. If not enough data is available, the experts can ask for additional information. The final version of the **external evaluation**

⁴⁵ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Order-3651_2021_Annex-2-Domains.pdf

⁴⁶ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Order-3651_2021_Annex-3-IOSUD.pdf

reports, together with **comments** received from the HEI, if the case, are analysed by the PSEC (in the case of the evaluation of DSD) or the Department of External Quality Evaluation (in the case of the evaluation of IOSUD); a **proposal for resolution** is issued in both cases. In this way, the **consistency of decisions** among domains from the same scientific area is assured. The Guides describe **how decisions should be taken**, considering the number and type of indicators that are partially or non-fulfilled.

ARACIS Council takes the final decision based on the findings of the experts' panel and the report of the PSEC or the Department of External Quality Evaluation.

As soon as finalised, all documents are available in ARACIS Cloud so that informed decisions can be taken.

In case there is **no agreement** on a particular indicator, all opinions are presented in the report, together with the respective arguments. If several cases of disagreements on same indicator are encountered, these are discussed within ARACIS Council, and **further guidance** is provided to the panels in order to ensure the same interpretation.

Analysis

ARACIS decisions are taken based on **clear standards and indicators**, which are **public** and **developed with the participation of main stakeholders**. Mechanisms are in place to ensure **consistency** of decisions.

Nevertheless, working with a large number of experts and performing yearly many evaluations is inherently leading to **challenges in ensuring consistency**. For example, there are cases when experts judge based on the situation in their institution or in the context of the prestige of the evaluated institution.

Further developments

Consistency of decisions and the extent to which they are based exclusively on data is one area of concern for ARACIS.

During training sessions, the consistency of decisions is always an important topic. To allocate enough time for analysis for each evaluation, ARACIS Council meetings take place over two days, one being entirely dedicated to decisions on evaluations.

5.6 ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

The 2.6 standard has been judged **partially compliant** by the ENQA review panel, respectively **compliant** by EQAR Register Committee in the last evaluation, so the report refers only to the doctoral studies evaluations.

Description of external evaluation report content

The external evaluation report (EER) is Annex no. 3⁴⁷ to the evaluation guide (IOSUD or DSD). It contains 7 parts:

I. **Introduction** - brief information about the institutional context and the way of organisation, the type of evaluation, the evaluation period and the composition of the Experts Committee.

II. **Methods** used - information is requested about the methods and tools used in the external evaluation process, before and during the evaluation visit.

III. **Analysis** of performance indicators - the situation is presented and an analysis is made, best practices are underlined, recommendations are formulated and the degree of fulfilment of each indicator has to be appreciated.

IV. **SWOT** Analysis.

V. **Overview** of judgments and recommendations for each indicator.

VI. **Conclusions** and general recommendations

VII. **Annexes**

The EER includes the **findings and judgments of all members** of the experts' panel. If one of the experts judges a particular indicator differently, her/his opinion will be included in the final report. **The international expert drafts her/his own report**, in English, the findings being integrated into the panel report, which is elaborated in Romanian, by the team coordinator.

The EER of the Experts Committee is sent to HEIs to check for **factual errors**.

The EER of the Experts Committee and the EER of the international expert are **published** on the ARACIS website together with the Decision of the ARACIS Council.

In the event of an appeal, the **report of the Appeals Commission** will be uploaded in the same place on the ARACIS website together with the Decision of the ARACIS Council.

All documents are published in their **integrality**, in **searchable** pdf format, on ARACIS website⁴⁸ and DEQAR. In particular, the final sections - SWOT analysis, overview of judgments and recommendations for each indicator and conclusions and general recommendations are of **interest to the general public**, giving a broad picture of respecting quality standards. The **names** of experts are also made **public** in the report.

Analysis

The reports **include the aspects mentioned in the ESG standard 2.6**, and are made **public**.

Some reports could be improved in terms of the relevance of information included, analysis of findings and the way in which recommendations are formulated.

⁴⁷ <https://www.aracis.ro/self-assesment-report-guide-doctoral-evaluation/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.aracis.ro/evaluarea-periodica-a-iosud/>

Further developments

ARACIS considers developing **courses** dedicated to expert report drafting.

5.7 ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

The 2.7 standard has been judged **fully compliant** by the ENQA review panel, respectively **partially compliant** by EQAR Register Committee in the last evaluation, so it will be analysed in its entirety.

Description of procedures

During 2018 – October 2022, ARACIS continued to use **two separate procedures**, one for solving appeals and another for solving complaints, as well as a document with additional details regarding procedures for submitting and solving appeals and complaints, included in [Annex 5](#), as they are not available on ARACIS website anymore.

- **Appeals:** the operational procedure *Settlement of appeals submitted by higher education institutions* was used until October 2022, covering appeals against the outcomes of external evaluation activities.

It was applied to all external quality assurance activities, and in order to address the evaluation of doctoral studies, the operational procedure was updated in 2021. **Appeals** can be submitted by HEIs within two weeks from receipt of the report and are analysed by the Executive Board (EB) of the ARACIS Council.

In the case of study programmes/domains, the EB designates a Commission, constituted of one member of the Consultative Commission⁴⁹ and one expert from the respective field of studies, that hasn't been involved in the evaluation. Based on the appeal and the evaluation documents, the Commission drafts a report which is validated by the Accreditation Department. The ARACIS Council has the final decision and elaborates its own report. In the case of institutional evaluations, a discussion between EB, the ARACIS Council member and the member of the permanent staff involved in the evaluation and representatives of the HEI is organised to discuss the content of the appeal. In case issues are clarified, the institution might withdraw the appeal. If not, the EB analysis the appeal, based on an internal report checking the methodological aspects that were not respected. If these are found grounded, at the proposal of the EB, ARACIS Council will nominate another Commission, constituted of 2 experts and one member of the staff, that will perform a new analysis that includes a new site visit.

The Agency publishes on its website, within the section Evaluations Results, the content of the appeal as well as the Report of ARACIS Council regarding the resolution of the

⁴⁹ The members of the Consultative Commission are delegated by the National Council of Rectors

appeal, which includes the name of experts that analysed the appeal. The number of appeals submitted in the last five years is presented in the table below.

Table 5. Total number of appeals by type of EQA activity, during 01.01.2018 - 30.11.2022

Appeals/EQA activity	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Institutional Evaluation	1 <i>dismissed, as not grounded</i>	-	-	-	2 <i>withdrawn by the HEIs</i>
Programme/ domain evaluation	3 <i>1 appeal approved, 2 dismissed, as not grounded</i>	2 <i>1 dismissed as the submission deadline was not observed; 1 dismissed as not grounded</i>	2 <i>1 dismissed as the submission deadline was not respected; 1 dismissed as not grounded</i>	5 <i>4 dismissed, as not grounded; 1 approved</i>	4 <i>2 dismissed, as not grounded; 2 approved</i>

- **Complaints:** the operational procedure *Settlement of complaints* was used until October 2022, covering cases of conflicts of interest/incompatibilities or breaching the provisions of the Code of Ethics or other aspects of ARACIS activities that are not related to a specific evaluation procedure.

In the case of complaints related to **conflicts of interest/incompatibilities**, the Evaluation Department is analysing the complaint in 3 days, and the replacement of the expert can be decided. If the complaint object is a **breach of the Code of Ethics**, it will be analysed by the Ethics Commission, following the procedure described by the Code.

The **complaints that are not related to a specific evaluation procedure** are solved in concordance with the applicable law, the answer being drafted by the departments in charge of the aspects concerned.

In the last five years, six complaints were analysed by the Ethics Commission, two were admitted as grounded, and one is under investigation. Against the ARACIS Council's Decision, in the case of one of the admitted complaints, an action in Court was formulated. The Court accepted the action and annulled the ARACIS Council decision for procedural reasons.

The **procedures for appeals and complaints were revised**⁵⁰ in October 2022 in order to make them more clear and simple.

Main **changes** are:

- there is one procedure in place, and the format was simplified;
- the complaints which are not related to the evaluation processes do not make any more the object of this procedure, making it more simple;
- same steps are applicable to all cycles of study programmes or domains;

⁵⁰ <https://www.aracis.ro/en/procedure-appeals-and-complaints/>

- the procedure for settling the appeals related to institutional evaluations was simplified;
- the object of complaints/appeals was enlarged;
- the decisions that can be taken as a result of a complaint/appeal are clearly described.

HEIs can submit an appeal against the results of the external evaluation on the grounds that they have not been objectively conducted and are not based on clear evidence or the criteria set by the evaluation methodology and/or evaluation procedures have not been correctly applied. Any restrictions to the object of the appeal was eliminated, as for example the need to rise the same matter in previous correspondence regarding the external evaluation report.

The revised procedure includes the following two situations that can make the subject of complaints:

- **situations of conflicts of interest** concerning the members of the expert evaluator panels;
- **violations of the provisions of the Code** of Ethics and norms of conduct which concerns how the experts have carried out the processes of external quality evaluation.

The HEI can submit complaints for conflicts of interest even if the case is not explicitly described in the Code of Ethics.

While the appeals can be submitted only by the evaluated HEI, complaints can be submitted by HEIs, education providers or any legal entity, public or private, interested in providing education, students and teachers, other individuals or interested parties.

The Agency can also decide to start an analysis procedure, even if a complaint from an external party is not submitted.

A **permanent Appeals Commission**⁵¹ composed of 3 members (2 academic experts, as full members, and 1 academic experts, as alternate member, listed in the ARACIS National Register of Evaluators; 1 student, as a full member, and 1 student as an alternate member, listed in the RNE-Students was established in November 2022. For appeals submitted against the outcome of external evaluation of study programmes or study domains, the Appeals Commission is completed with **2 academic experts**, members of the National Register of Evaluators for the respective study domain. Complaints regarding conflicts of interests concerning the members of the expert evaluator panels shall be solved by the EB of ARACIS. Complaints concerning violations of the provisions of the Code of ethics and norms of conduct in the activities carried out by ARACIS regarding the quality assurance and assessment in higher education in Romania shall be solved by the **Ethics Commission**.

The revised procedure for addressing complaints and appeals, as well as the composition of the Appeals Commission, are **publicly available** on the Agency's website⁵². Also, reports

⁵¹ <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Componenta-Comisiei-de-solutionare-a-contestatiilor.pdf>

⁵² <https://www.aracis.ro/en/procedure-appeals-and-complaints/>

resulting from the appeals review are communicated to the institution and are published on the Agency's website within the section dedicated to Evaluations Results.

Implementation of suggestions and considerations

- ARACIS does not have a permanent appeals body but with each new case an ad hoc commission is established by the Executive Board to deal with.

The new procedure establishes a **permanent Appeals Commission for a mandate of 4 years**. Nevertheless, in the case of study programmes/domains, 2 additional members are added ad-hoc, as they should be experts from the scientific field concerned. We believe it is mandatory to add specific expertise to the Commission. The Code of Ethics, approved in the current version in 2017, establishes a fixed composition of the Ethics Commission.

- the members nominated to act in the Appeals Committee are not published;

The members appointed in the **Appeals Commission** are published with the report⁵³.

- the revised procedure is not easily accessible on the website and ARACIS should take steps to make its appeals and complaints procedure more widely known;

The procedure for appeals and complaints is published on ARACIS website in the section dedicated to **Methodologies**. We consider this being **accessible** to the interested parties.

In November 2022, the Agency organised an online information session for the HEIs representatives in charge with quality assurance to present and explain the provisions of the revised procedure.

Moreover, in the last two years, the Agency diversified its communication methods, by having, besides its website, an institutional Facebook page⁵⁴, which publishes news about the Agency's activities, by creating a WhatsApp group with contacts from HEIs, to whom the Agency sends relevant news and also by launching a newsletter⁵⁵ which is sent every three months to different stakeholders. Regular press releases are also provided to the media.

Information about the revised procedure for appeals and complaints was disseminated through all relevant communication channels.

Information related to appeals and complaints are included in ARACIS annual reports.

- more steps are needed to ensure full transparency in the Agency's handling of appeals.

The revised procedure describes in a more straightforward manner the object of appeals and complaints, the deadlines for submission, the steps, deadlines and persons involved in dealing with the request submitted, as well as the outcomes.

⁵³ https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SP5194_UB_Lb_si_lit_moderna_Lb_si_lit_catalana_B_16.04.2020.pdf

⁵⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/ARACIS.RO/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.aracis.ro/buletin-informativ/>

Analysis

A **sound** procedure for dealing with complaints and procedures is in place, but further reflection will be needed after it is applied in practice in the current form. During discussions with the HEIs representatives, no comments were formulated.

A very **low number** of complaints and appeals was submitted in the last five years, compared to the total number of procedures implemented. The proportion of admitted appeals and complaints is reasonable, which is an indication that they are treated with impartiality.

An issue is related to the fact that the decision on a complaint was annulled by Court, the Agency being obliged to reintroduce the expert concerned in the National Register of Experts. The Court decision was taken on procedural grounds and not related to the substance of the complaint.

Further developments

The Agency is **preoccupied with creating the conditions** for the HEIs and all stakeholders to submit complaints, appeals or other types of demands related to ARACIS activities, as these offer a **valuable critical reflection** and can drive improvements. Also, it is essential to provide to the HEIs all guarantees that **their rights are safeguarded** and that in all cases, the procedures are fair and implemented according to quality standards.

It is also important to create an organisational culture in which complaints and appeals are not seen as a threat but are **recognised for their actual value** and in which all those involved are supported to deal with them in an impartial way.

The Agency is approaching all requests received in a spirit of openness and a commitment to fairness and improving practice.

Nevertheless, **institutions often hesitate** to file formal appeals and complaints and prefer to discuss with the Agency different issues they met during evaluation procedures.

Further constant dialogue with the HEI representatives is needed to **consolidate the trust** that their requests are treated with impartiality and that, actually, for the Agency, these are opportunities to improve its activities. A reflection can be started on whether there are any gaps in Agency processes and procedures that could be addressed to help prevent future similar situations.

Training for all those involved in dealing with the appeals and complaints is envisaged. Moreover, the legal advice for these activities is to be strengthened.

PART III – SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths

- Mature quality assurance agency, ENQA member and EQAR listed since 2009;
- Strong autonomy;
- Solid internal quality assurance system;
- Resources available for institutional development EQA activities based on constant and improved feedback gathered from stakeholders;
- Clear, consistent, transparent and evidence-based EQA procedures applied to public and private HE providers;
- High-quality staff and experienced experts due to careful selection and periodic training;
- Recognition as an expertise provider in the field of quality assurance and higher education;
- Strong involvement of students both in the agency governance and in EQA activities;
- International reputation, an active member of INQAAHE, CEENQA, ENAEE, ECA, and presence in Bologna process structures and ENQA working groups;
- Participation in many international projects, both as partner and beneficiary;
- Presence in media and diversification of communication channels;
- Own scientific review in the field of quality assurance;
- Active in topics of interest like research assessment or academic integrity.

Weaknesses

- Not enough space for innovation;
- The Methodology for post-university studies is not yet developed;
- The Guide for the implementation of the European Approach for Joint Programs is not yet developed;
- Process for a regular content update of templates not defined;
- Limited use of ICT in the Agency's activities and procedures; the need for finalising the work in progress on automation of EQA procedures and for extending digitalisation to other activities of the Agency;
- The employers are not involved yet in all Permanent Speciality Experts' Commissions (PSEC);
- Difficulties in assuring consistency in experts' judgements and behaviour;
- Students are not treated in some panels as equal partners;
- Some information on the website is not easy to be found or understood by the broad public; the English version of the website lacks information;
- Delays in completing the EQA procedures in due time, so evaluation contracts need to be extended;
- Many complex documents, sometimes redundant, accompany the EQA procedures;
- Not consistently smooth communication among the departments/services of the Agency;
- Low staff salaries, as regulated by national legislation, make the Agency less attractive for people with experience and expertise in QA or HE.

Opportunities

- High visibility and reputation at the international level;
- Participation in international projects;
- Opportunity to participate in cross-border quality assurance activities;
- Active collaboration and engagement of HEIs' academic and QA staff in ARACIS's activities and initiatives;
- Suitable premises for cooperation with the Ministry of Education, National Rectors' Council, student associations, and the universities staff union;
- Innovation in QA driven by the establishment and development of European alliances and internationalisation of EQA activities;
- Participation of the ARACIS's staff at international training/exchanges and staff development programs, as well as at national and international QA events;
- HE and QA legislative changes;
- ICT development; more and various means for digitalisation of processes.

Threats

- EQA activities performed in Romania by EQAR-listed quality assurance agencies that might not respect the national legislation;
- Digital, demographic, and labour market changes that lead to a decrease in the number of students, programmes and HEIs;
- The low motivation of external stakeholders from some areas to contribute to the quality assurance of higher education; low interest in becoming experts and conducting external evaluation in some fields;
- Quality culture not developed enough;
- Lack of interest in becoming experts in some scientific fields;
- Permanent staff quitting the Agency for better-paid jobs.



PART IV – CONCLUSIONS

ARACIS is a mature and reliable quality assurance agency, the national provider of external quality assurance services for the higher education system in Romania, and internationally recognised and appreciated.

2020 and 2021 were two challenging years for ARACIS, due to the pandemic and the necessity to finalise the evaluation of doctoral studies organised in Romania. Nevertheless, the recommendations of the 2018 ENQA review were carefully considered, and an action plan was elaborated and implemented to improve ARACIS processes and activities. Many actions have been taken in this respect, as described in the SAR, including those for developing the internal quality assurance system and ensuring complete transparency in the Agency's handling of appeals.

The experience gained from the several international projects/best practice exchanges in which ARACIS participated or still participates has been more than valuable for achieving all these goals.

The development and implementation of the evaluation of doctoral studies was a complex process consisting of two different types of external quality assurance activities: evaluation of the organisation framework, i.e., the IOSUD and evaluation of the DSD in which the doctoral study programmes are organised. The Agency succeeded in finalising in time the whole process, despite the timeframe constraints imposed by legal provisions, and thus completing this exercise, very important also for demonstrating its institutional capacity. Lessons learned on this occasion have been much appreciated both by management and staff and are going to be used for the improvement of other external quality assurance activities conducted by ARACIS.

Nevertheless, designing methodologies fit for purpose has been identified as one of the significant areas where the Agency needs to evolve, in the current HE and quality assurance systems development. This would strengthen ARACIS's relationship with the higher education institutions, public authorities, and other relevant stakeholders, and would lead to an increased impact of quality assurance processes in the benefit of students, staff and the entire society.

We are confident that going through this targeted review will support the Agency's efforts and we are looking forward to the external reviewers' assessment.



List of abbreviations and acronyms

ARACIS	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
CNEAA	National Council of Academic Evaluation and Accreditation
CNR	National Council of Rectors
DEQAR	Database of External Quality Assurance Results
DSD	Doctoral Study Domains
EB	Executive Board
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education
EER	External Evaluation Report
ENAAE	European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EQA	External quality assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
GEO	Government Emergency Ordinance
GD	Government Decision
HE	Higher education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IOSUD	Institutions Organising Doctoral Studies
PSEC	Permanent Speciality Experts' Commissions
QA	Quality Assurance

Glossary of terms

Accreditation	Accreditation is the quality assurance modality that certifies compliance with the standards for the operation of education-providing organisations and their study programmes. Accredited higher education institutions are part of the national higher education system and have the right to issue diplomas, certificates and other study documents recognized by the Ministry of Education, and to organize graduation examinations for the completion of bachelor, master and/or doctoral study programmes.
Criteria	A criterion refers to a fundamental aspect of the organisation and operation of an education-providing organisation.
Internal Management Control System	All forms of control exercised at the level of public institutions, including internal audit, established by the management in accordance with its objectives and legal regulations, in order to ensure the administration of funds in an economical, efficient and effective manner; it also includes organizational structures, methods and procedures.
Internal Management Control Standards	Internal Management Control Standards define a minimum of general management requirements that all public institutions must follow in their activity.
Performance Indicator	The performance indicator is a tool for measuring the extent of performance of an activity carried out by an education-providing organisation by reference to standards, and standards of reference, respectively.
Provisional authorization to operate	Provisional authorization to operate for study programmes and/or institutions is the first stage of the accreditation procedure, which confers the higher education institution or the education providing organization the right to carry out educational activities and organize, if necessary, admission examinations for a study program.
Standards	A standard is the description of the requirements formulated in terms of rules or results, which define the minimum mandatory level of achievement of an educational activity.
Quality evaluation	Quality evaluation consists in the examination, based on several criteria, of the extent to which an education-providing organisation and its programmes meet the standards and the reference standards. When quality evaluation is performed by the education-providing organisation itself, it takes the form of internal evaluation . When quality evaluation is performed by a specialised national or international agency, it takes the form of external evaluation .
Quality of education	The quality of education is the set of features of a study program and of its provider, by which the beneficiaries' expectations, as well as the quality standards are met.



List of annexes

Annex 1 - Composition of the SAR work team

Annex 2 - List of procedures developed for the support processes in the framework of the Internal Management Control System

Annex 3 – Mapping grid - Compliance of the newly introduced EQA with standards of Part 1 of the ESG. Criteria, standards and performance indicators for the Evaluation of IOSUD and DSD

Annex 4 – ARACIS External evaluation guides

Annex 5 - Procedures for solving appeals and complaints, valid until October 2022