

Guide on conducting external quality evaluation procedures for the purpose of obtaining or maintaining the accreditation for a joint study programme

1. Purpose

This *Guide on conducting external quality evaluation procedures for the purpose of obtaining or maintaining the accreditation for a joint study programme*, hereinafter the Guide, describes the regulatory framework, the eligibility criteria for participating in an external evaluation procedure based on this Guide, preliminary activities before the evaluation procedure, the stages of the external evaluation, and the follow-up evaluation activities; the Guide should be used when the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) coordinates the external quality evaluation of a short-cycle, cycle I, cycle II or cycle III integrated higher education study programme, hereinafter a joint programme, in applying the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Study Programmes*¹, hereinafter the EA.

2. Applicable regulatory framework

2.1. Provisions of the Romanian legislation

2.1.1. Joint programmes are organised by accredited Romanian higher education institutions (HEIs) jointly with accredited HEIs from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), according to the provisions of art. 8 para. (5), art. 28 para. (6) and (12), art. 30 para. (2) and (6), art. 39 para. (5), art. 102 para. (3) letter f and para. (8) of *Law no. 199/2023 on higher education*, as further amended and supplemented, hereinafter *Law no. 199/2023*, and the provisions of the *Framework methodology for the organisation and operation of joint higher education studies organised at Romanian higher education institutions, completed with a joint diploma or a double or multiple diploma*, approved by Order no. 4637/2024 of the Minister of Education, hereinafter the *Methodology*.

2.1.2. According to the *Methodology*, joint programmes can be organised for any of the following higher education study cycles:

- a) *short cycle - short-term higher education studies*,
- b) *cycle I - bachelor studies*,
- c) *cycle II - master studies*,
- d) *cycle III - doctoral studies*.

2.1.3. The specific domains, criteria and standards for each stage of the accreditation, the external accreditation methodology, and the time frame of the accreditation procedure are those established at European level in the EA, as per the provisions of art. 226 para. (5) and art. 249 para. (3) of *Law no. 199/2023*.

¹https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/73/1/European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_s_613731.pdf

2.1.4. Joint study programmes shall be accredited without conducting the procedure for the provisional authorisation to operate. Furthermore, no distinct procedure is necessary for different tuition languages or if the same study programme is delivered in different geographic areas, according to the provisions of art. 30, para. (6) of Law no. 199/2023.

2.2. Provisions of the EA

2.2.1. The curriculum of a joint programme shall be coordinated and delivered jointly by different higher education institutions from different countries, usually belonging to the EHEA. As case may be, a joint programme shall be completed with a double/multiple diploma or a joint diploma.

2.2.2. EA applies if there are national requirements, for all or for some of the HEIs involved, regarding the external quality evaluation of higher education study programmes, provided that both the procedure and the result of such evaluation are recognised by the countries of origin of the HEIs.

2.2.3. In the case of joint study programmes that result in qualifications aiming to meet the minimally agreed training requirements for a profession covered by the EU Directive 2005/36/EC, the competent authority of a EU Member State shall notify such joint study programme to the European Commission. The cooperating institutions will need to keep this in mind when they identify and contact an agency for the external quality evaluation.

3. Eligibility requirements enabling participation in an external evaluation procedure based on the EA

3.1. If a Romanian HEI participates in organising the joint programme, the following eligibility requirements should be met for applying an external evaluation procedure based on the EA:

- a) At least one of the higher education institutions involved in organising the joint programme should originate from a EHEA member country, other than Romania;
- b) The institutions that intend to organise the joint programme should be recognised as HEIs² in their country of origin;
- c) The organising HEIs should be accredited by an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency;
- d) Partner HEIs should have the capacity to organise the joint programme, and the diplomas released upon completion of the joint programme should be recognised in their countries of origin;
- e) the legislation in the countries of origin should allow for application of the EA, and the results of the evaluation should be recognised;
- f) a partnership agreement should be in place between the HEIs, proving coordination and joint delivery of the higher education programme.

² Institutions that deliver short-cycle, cycle I, cycle II or cycle III higher education programmes.

3.2. If there is not at least one Romanian HEI involved in organising the joint programme, the following eligibility requirements should be met for applying an external evaluation procedure based on the EA:

- a) The higher education institutions involved in organising the joint programme should originate from at least two EHEA member states;
- b) The institutions that intend to organise the joint programme should be recognised as HEIs³ in their country of origin;
- c) Partner HEIs should have the capacity to organise the joint programme, and the diplomas released upon completion of the joint programme should be recognised in their countries of origin;
- d) the legislation in the countries of origin should allow for application of the EA, and the results of the evaluation should be recognised;
- e) a partnership agreement should be in place between the HEIs, proving coordination and joint delivery of the higher education programme.

4. Preliminary stages before initiating the external evaluation procedure

4.1. HEIs interested in external evaluation for the purpose of organising a joint programme shall file a written request with ARACIS, preferably **18 months** before the date envisaged for the completion of the evaluation procedure.

4.2. Within no more than **30 days** from receiving such request, ARACIS shall organise a consultation meeting with the representatives of the interested HEIs, involving members of the technical apparatus, usually from the International Evaluation Compartment staff. At this meeting, ARACIS shall present the EA and the provisions of this Guide, and the HEI should describe the joint programme they intend to organise.

4.3. Within the agreed deadline, the HEIs shall send ARACIS **the documents required for the administrative checking of the eligibility for applying the EA**, as per section 3 of this Guide, as follows:

- a) evidence that the institutions are recognised as HEIs in their countries of origin;
- b) if a Romanian HEI is member of the partnership, evidence that the HEI is accredited, indicating the quality assurance agency which conducted the external evaluation;
- c) evidence showing that the organising HEIs can deliver the joint programme, and that the diplomas released are recognised in their countries of origin;
- d) evidence showing that the EA and the related decision are recognised in the HEIs' countries of origin;
- e) the cooperation agreement between the HEIs that will participate in organising the joint programme.

³ Institutions that deliver short-cycle, cycle I, cycle II or cycle III higher education programmes.

- 4.4. A panel appointed by the ARACIS president upon the proposal of the general manager, including 3 members from the International Evaluation Compartment and the Single Electronic Contact Point Compartment, shall review the submitted documents and draft a report on the extent to which the eligibility requirements are met.
- 4.5. Based on the report mentioned in para. 4.4, the Executive Board of the ARACIS Council (BEX) shall issue a decision regarding the fulfilment of the eligibility requirements established in section 3, within no more than **60 days** from receiving the documents. Such decision shall be communicated to the HEIs involved in organising the joint programme within no more than **15 days** after it is passed.
- 4.6. If the eligibility requirements are met, ARACIS shall inform the HEIs involved in organising the joint programme of the amount of the fee, established by decision of the ARACIS Council according to art. 257 para. (4) of Law no. 199/2023.

5. Stages of the external evaluation procedure

5.1. Filing of the request for external evaluation and initiation of the evaluation procedure

After going through the stages presented in the previous section, the HEI appointed by the participating institutions to coordinate the joint programme shall file a **request to initiate the external quality evaluation process** with ARACIS for the accreditation/periodic evaluation of a joint study programme; such request shall be drafted using the template provided in *Annex 1* of this Guide.

The request shall be sent in electronic form to solicitari.evaluare@aracis.ro or filled in online, at least **9 months** before expiry of the joint study programme accreditation in the case of a periodic evaluation procedure.

ARACIS, through the Institutional Relations and Informatization Service, shall send the HEI coordinating the joint programme the **evaluation service contract** for signing, within no more than **15 days** after receiving the request for evaluation. The evaluation service contract shall be signed by all HEIs involved in organising and delivering the joint programme, and include provisions regarding the applicable regulatory framework, the parties involved, the duration and how to modify it, the value, obligations of the parties, manner of communicating, information confidentiality and personal data protection, contract termination, force majeure, appeals, petitions and disputes, and liability.

The coordinating HEI shall appoint a **contact person** for the external quality evaluation process for the joint programme. ARACIS shall appoint a **technical secretary** for the evaluation procedure, usually a member of the International Evaluation Compartment.

The contact person, together with the technical secretary, shall establish the schedule of the external evaluation procedure, as per the template in *Annex 2*, within no more than **30 days** after signing the contract.

5.2. Development and submission of the Internal Evaluation Report (IER)

The internal evaluation report (IER) with its annexes shall be submitted to ARACIS in

digital format via the ARACIS electronic evaluation platform, at least **3 months** before the date scheduled for the on-site visit and **no more than 45 days** after the contract signing date.

The technical secretary shall provide support with publishing the internal evaluation documents on the platform, and check the compliance of such documents with the provisions of this Guide. In case of non-compliance, the technical secretary shall ask the coordinating HEI to remake or supplement the documents within no more than **15 days**.

The IER focuses on the joint operation of the evaluated higher education study programme, and includes information about the higher education systems that the partner HEIs belong to, and about the compliance with the standards established by the EA. The IER shall be drafted in English language, complying with the structure presented in **Annex 3** of this guide, and usually should not be longer than 40 pages and 25,000 words. As much as possible, it is recommended to limit the number of annexes and include link references in the text, linking to the relevant documents published on the websites of the partner HEIs. The role of the annexes is to provide additional information about the elements presented in the content of the IER, but one should be able to understand the IER without using the annexes. Whenever relevant, the information shall be presented gender-wise.

5.3. Establishing the membership of the Expert Evaluators' Panel

Within **1 month** after initiation of the evaluation procedure, ARACIS shall set up a panel of expert evaluators consisting of **at least four members, including one student**, originating from **at least two of the countries** where the HEIs involved in organising the integrated programme are seated.

The expert evaluation panel shall include at least the following:

- ✓ one expert evaluator, member of the teaching staff, registered in the National Register of Evaluators (RNE) of ARACIS - coordinator of the expert evaluators' panel;
- ✓ one expert evaluator, member of the teaching staff – panel member;
- ✓ one student, preferably one who is studying or has completed a higher education study programme in the domain that is subject to the evaluation;
- ✓ one employers' representative - panel member.

When appointing the members of the expert evaluators' panel, ARACIS shall collaborate with quality assurance agencies from the countries of origin of the partner HEIs.

The following shall be taken into account when appointing teaching staff members who are members of the expert evaluators' panels:

- the teaching and scientific research experience of the appointed member in the study domain(s) of the evaluated joint programme,
- international experience in higher education;
- international experience in higher education quality assurance.

Collectively, the members of the expert evaluators' panel shall prove that they are familiar with the higher education systems from which the HEIs delivering the joint programme originate, and have command of the language(s) in which the joint programme will be taught. If the joint programme is organised in the form of remote education, the members

of the experts' panel should also have expertise related to the specific aspects concerning this form of education. Gender equality should also be assured among the members of the expert evaluators' panel.

The list of the selected expert evaluators' panel members shall be sent to the partner HEIs for information, and the partner HEIs may request one or several members of the panel to be replaced, in well-grounded cases.

The evaluation panel is assisted by the technical secretary.

ARACIS instructs the panel members on aspects related to:

- external evaluation activities;
- EA and the provisions of this guide;
- the higher education systems to which the partner HEIs belong;
- the particular aspects of the joint programme;
- ethics and professional conduct in evaluation activities.

5.4. Analysis of the internal evaluation report and request for any clarifications/additional information

Within no more than **7 days** after receiving the IER or the additions to it, as applicable, the IER and its annexes shall be provided to the members of the expert evaluators' panel by granting them access to the ARACIS electronic evaluation platform. The technical secretary shall support the panel members in accessing the platform.

The expert evaluators' panel shall analyse the IER and, if necessary, within no more than **30 days**, may request the partner institutions to provide clarifications or additional information about the elements referred to in the report. The coordinating higher education institution shall reply to such requests within no more than **15 days after receiving them**.

5.5. Carrying out of the evaluation visit

During the on-site visit, the expert evaluators' panel shall verify that the information contained in the IER matches the reality on site, and talk with the stakeholders in order to assess compliance with the standards. The coordinator of the expert evaluators' panel shall coordinate the discussions within the on-site visit and seek to ensure balanced engagement of all participants. The technical secretary shall attend the on-site visit, and support the experts' panel with organising the visit, as well as with ensuring compliance with the EA and the provisions of this Guide. Furthermore, the technical secretary shall draft the minutes of the meetings.

As a rule, the visit shall be conducted at one location, and last for 2-3 days; however, the evaluators should consider the conditions offered in all the locations where teaching activities are delivered within the joint programme. The schedule and location of the evaluation visit shall be established by the coordinator of the expert evaluators' panel with the contact person from the coordinating HEI, with support from the technical secretary, at least **one month** prior to the visit.

During the on-site visit, the panel will conduct discussions with the representatives of all partner HEIs - the management of the institutions and coordinators of the joint programme, students, teaching staff, employers or other stakeholders. *Annex 4* to this guide includes recommendations concerning the activities to be conducted during the

visit.

The on-site visit of the expert evaluators' panel shall end with a session in which conclusions and preliminary recommendations will be presented, without, however, referring to the degree of compliance with the standards.

During the on-site visit, the coordinator of the expert evaluators' panel may request additional information and documents, provided that these are already in the possession of the evaluated HEI given the nature of their activities conducted for the implementation of the joint programme or that they can be provided and submitted by the end of the visit.

5.6. Developing the External Evaluation Report (EER), and assessments on how standards are met

The expert evaluators' panel shall draft the External Evaluation Report (EER), which will include reference to relevant evidence, analysis, and conclusions regarding the **degree of compliance** with the standards established through the EA, as well as **recommendations** for improving future activities within the joint programme. The EER shall be based on the IER, the findings during the on-site visit, and the additional documents submitted by the end of the visit.

Particular emphasis shall be placed within the EER on the aspects that are specific to the operation of the joint higher education study programme.

The **recommendations** shall take into account the context within which the joint programme is carried out, and focus on the distinctive aspects of the joint programme; it should be possible to implement these recommendations during the period before the follow-up evaluation or the periodic evaluation, and the recommendations should be expressed in specific terms, so that the HEI would know exactly how to implement each recommendation.

The **evaluation results** for each standard shall be as follows:

- a) met;
- b) partially met;
- c) not met.

The expert evaluators may ascertain that a standard is:

- a) **met**, when all the aspects included in its description are achieved;
- b) **partially met**, when key aspects included in its description are not achieved;
- c) **not met**, when all the aspects included in its description are not achieved.

Depending on the degree of compliance with the standards, the experts' panel shall propose a **decision** regarding offering/maintaining the accreditation for the joint programme, if necessary, according to the laws of the countries of origin of the partner HEIs. The decision should be justified based on the analysed standards, and supported with data and data analysis for each individual standard.

The report shall be drafted in English language, according to the template provided in **Annex 5** of this Guide. The report shall be drafted by the coordinator of the expert evaluators' panel, who shall include the contributions of the panel members into a joint document on the ARACIS evaluation platform. The report should not exceed 25 pages

and 12,500 words, annexes excluded. The schedule of the on-site visit and the list of the reviewed documents should be enclosed to the report.

The EER shall be sent to ARACIS and to the HEI within no more than 45 days after completion of the on-site visit.

5.7. Consultation with the HEI on the EER

The coordinator of the expert evaluators' panel shall send the draft EER to the joint programme's contact person for feedback regarding any clerical errors.

The reply of the partner higher education institutions shall be sent by the contact person to the coordinator of the evaluation panel, within no more than **15 days** after receiving the draft EER. The expert evaluators' panel shall finalise the EER and, if necessary, integrate any feedback received, and send the EER to ARACIS and to the HEI within no more than 15 days.

5.8. Analysis in the Permanent Speciality Commission

The technical secretary shall send the EER to the Permanent Speciality Commission(s) (PSC) pertaining to the study domain(s) to which the joint programme belongs. The Permanent Speciality Commission(s) shall analyse the EER, and may ask the members of the expert evaluators' panel to remake it, if they find that the provisions of the EA and/or of this Guide have not been complied with or that the report does not include sufficient data and evidence to enable a decision to be passed. The expert evaluators' panel shall respond to such request within no more than **15 days** after receiving the EER.

The PSC shall propose a decision to the ARACIS Council, which shall be noted in a minute that will include the reasoning supporting the proposed decision. The PSC shall complete its analysis within no more than **30 days** after receiving the final version of the EER from the expert evaluators' panel.

5.9. Analysis by the ARACIS Council and passing of the decision

The ARACIS Council shall analyse the proposal of the PSC within **no more than 30 days** after receiving the report of the PSC, and pass a decision, as follows:

- ✓ to grant/maintain accreditation for the joint programme for a period of 6 years;
- ✓ to grant/maintain accreditation for the joint programme for a period of 3 years;
- ✓ to not grant/to withdraw accreditation for the joint programme.

As a rule, if one standard is assessed as not met, the decision shall be to not grant or, as applicable, to withdraw the accreditation.

The ARACIS Council may ask the PSC to remake the report, if the Council finds that the provisions of the EA and/or of this Guide have not been complied with or that the report does not include sufficient data and evidence to enable a decision to be passed. The PSC shall remake its report within **30 days** after receiving the request from the ARACIS Council.

The decision of the ARACIS Council shall be communicated to the partner HEIs within **45 days** after being passed.

Appeals and complaints regarding the result of the evaluation or the way in which the evaluation procedure was implemented shall be settled according to the specific

procedure described at: https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Procedura-de-solutionare-a-contestatiilor-si-sesizarilor_28.10.2022.pdf

The External Evaluation Report and the Decision of the ARACIS Council for the joint programme shall be published on the ARACIS website and in the DEQAR after the ARACIS Council adopts the final decision (and any appeals are settled, if applicable). The Report shall include the names of the members of the Experts' Panel.

6. Follow-up evaluation activities

The follow-up evaluation intends to support the partner HEIs in the process of improving the quality of their teaching and research/innovation activities conducted within the joint programme. Furthermore, the follow-up evaluation assesses the extent to which the recommendations given during the external evaluation process have been implemented by the evaluated institutions, and checks that the aspects related to the standards evaluated as partially met have been partially remedied.

The external evaluation agency, together with the partner HEIs shall establish how follow-up activities will take place.

The partner HEIs shall inform ARACIS in case of any changes in the structure of the partnership in the period before the next evaluation, and submit the new partnership agreement.