

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in
Higher Education



GUIDE
for the implementation of external quality evaluation
procedures for the accreditation of doctoral study
programmes in a doctoral study domain in higher
education institutions in the Republic of Moldova

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Contents:

1. Purpose.....	3
2. Applicable regulatory framework.....	4
3. Indicators used in external quality evaluation	4
4. Stages of the external quality evaluation procedure	4
4.1. Drafting and submission of the Internal Evaluation Report (IER), annex to the request for initiation of the external evaluation procedure	4
4.2. Establishing the membership and appointing the members of the External Evaluation Experts' Panel	5
4.3. Analysis of the internal evaluation report and request for any clarifications/additional information.....	6
4.4. On-site visit	6
4.5. Drafting of the External Evaluation Report (EER), and assessments on the level to which indicators are fulfilled	7
4.6. Consultation with the HEI on the EER	7
4.7. Analysis in the Permanent Speciality Commission, and draft decision	7
4.8. Analysis by the Department of Evaluation of University Studies and the ARACIS Council; passing of the decision	8
4.9. Appeals and complaints.....	9
4.10. Publishing the EER.....	9
5. Follow-up evaluation activities	9
5.1. Purpose	9
5.2. Drafting and sending of the progress report.....	9
5.3. Appointing the expert evaluator; drafting and discussing the follow-up evaluation report	9
5.4. Validation of the follow-up evaluation report.....	10

1. Purpose

In **art. 249 para. (1) letter d)**, *Law no. 199/2023 - the higher education law*, as further amended and supplemented, sets the responsibilities of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, among which the responsibility to “**develop and publish its own internal procedures for external evaluation of the quality of education**”.

According to **art. 20 para. (2)** of the *Methodology for external evaluation of the quality of education in higher education*, approved by Government Decision no. 962/2024, hereinafter the *Methodology*, “**ARACIS shall approve, by decision of the ARACIS Council**, the guides on the procedures for conducting the evaluation processes, the external evaluation standards and performance indicators, established according to the provisions of paragraph (1), hereinafter referred to as the guides, which it shall publish on its own website.”

This *Guide on the implementation of external quality evaluation procedures for the accreditation of doctoral studies in a doctoral study domain (DSD) in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova*, hereinafter the *Guide*, materialises the provisions of *Law no. 199/2023 on higher education*, as further amended and supplemented, and of the *Methodology*, as well as the provisions of the *Republic of Moldova’s Code of Education (Code no. CE152/2014 of 17.07.2014)*, as further amended and supplemented, hereinafter the *Code*.

The Guide applies for the DSD accreditation procedure **for all types of doctoral studies**, in external quality evaluation procedures performed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. According to the provisions of **art. 114 para. (5)** of the *Code*, “*Higher education institutions may not acquire an authorisation for provisional operation or an accreditation for master and doctoral studies (cycles II and III) if the bachelor study programmes (cycle I) in the same domain are not accredited*”.

The *Guide* describes the applicable regulatory framework, the steps of the procedure, the follow-up evaluation activity and the decision-making processes, including the following annexes:

- ✓ Annex 1 Standards and indicators for the external quality evaluation of doctoral study domains;
- ✓ Annex 2 Structure of the Internal Evaluation Report (IER)
- ✓ Annex 3 Request for initiation of the external quality evaluation procedure;
- ✓ Annex 4 Recommendations for the activities conducted during the on-site visit;
- ✓ Annex 5 Structure of the External Evaluation Report (EER);
- ✓ Annex 6 Structure of the Progress Report (PR);
- ✓ Annex 7 Structure of the Follow-Up Evaluation Report (FER);

According to the provisions of **art. 3 para. (1)** of the *Methodology*, the purpose of the external quality evaluation process is to:

- a) certify the capacity of higher education institutions and education providing institutions to meet the expectations of their beneficiaries by meeting the standards;
- b) ensure protection for the direct and indirect beneficiaries of higher education and post-graduate education, as well as the beneficiaries of permanent education by producing and disseminating systematic, coherent, credible publicly accessible information about the quality of education in higher education.

Art. 229 para. (5) and **art. 223 para. (3)** of *Law no. 199/ 2023 - the higher education law*, as further amended and supplemented, provide that the external evaluation process shall analyse the match between the internal evaluation of the quality of education and the state of facts, based on a multicriterial examination of the extent to which the programmes delivered by a higher education institution or an education provider meet the relevant standards.

2. Applicable regulatory framework

The legal framework of the relationships for the design, organisation, functioning and development of the education system in the Republic of Moldova is established by the **Code**.

Higher education institutions may organise doctoral studies according to the provisions of the **Code**, art. 76 para. (2) letter c and para. (3), art. 78 para. (2), art. 82 para. (3) letter c, art. 92 para. (1) letter a, art. 92 para. (7), art. 94, art. 107 para. (4), art. 116 para. (3) and (4), art. 119 para. (1) letter b) and letter c), art. 121 para. (3), art. 122 para. (7), the provisions of the **Regulation for organising doctoral studies**, cycle III, approved by **Government Decision** no. HG1007/2014 of 10.12.2014, as further amended and supplemented, hereinafter the **Regulation**, and the provisions of the **Framework Plan** for doctoral studies, approved by **Order of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova**, no. 1036/2020, hereinafter the **Framework Plan**.

Thus, according to the provisions in art. 12 para. (1) letter i) of the Code, doctoral study programmes shall be organised within cycle III: doctoral education, and correspond to level 8 - higher education according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-2011).

Art. 94 para. (5) of the **Code** sets forth that “*Doctoral studies include three types of programmes:*”

a) **scientific doctoral studies**, the purpose of which is to produce original, internationally recognised scientific knowledge. A scientific doctoral programme is a prerequisite for developing a professional career in higher education and research;

b) **vocational doctoral studies**, the purpose of which is to achieve development and innovation in vocational practices, and which focuses on applied research, including in arts and sports. A vocational doctoral programme can fulfil a prerequisite for developing a professional career in higher education and research;

c) **industrial doctoral studies**, which focus on the connection between the doctoral student, the higher education institution, and the industrial sector. The purpose of industrial doctoral programmes is to promote research that can be capitalised on commercially; such doctoral programmes provide benefits, competences and research facilities in the industrial sector, leading to knowledge transfer between higher education institutions and companies of the industrial sector.”

3. Indicators used in external quality evaluation

“Based on consultations with higher education institutions, ARACIS shall establish which external evaluation standards and performance indicators mentioned in the annex shall be used for the evaluation of higher education programmes/domains in each cycle and the evaluation of higher education programmes in continuous training and permanent education in higher education”, as stipulated in art. 20 para. (1) of the **Methodology**. Furthermore, the **Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova** was consulted in the process of establishing standards and performance indicators.

Thus, the performance indicators used in the accreditation procedure for a DSD are listed in **Annex 1 to this Guide**.

4. Stages of the external quality evaluation procedure

4.1. Drafting and submission of the Internal Evaluation Report (IER), annex to the request for initiation of the external evaluation procedure

Within their internal quality assurance processes, higher education institutions (HEI), based on their own standards and in compliance with the standards stipulated in the Annex to the Methodology, shall perform a self-evaluation and produce an internal evaluation report (IER).

The IER shall be drafted in Romanian or English language, complying with the structure presented in **Annex 2** to this guide, and usually should not be longer **than 50 pages** (excluding the annexes). The enclosed documents shall be in Romanian language. 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 website of the HEI.

The HEI shall file a **request for initiation of the external quality evaluation procedure** with ARACIS, hereinafter the **request**, drafted as per the template provided in **Annex 3** to this Guide, and enclose the IER to such request.

The HEI shall appoint a **contact person** for the DSD external quality evaluation process, and indicate such person in the **request** for initiation of the procedure; ARACIS shall provide support with the procedure through the **Quality Assurance Direction (DAC) expert** in charge with the activity of the *Permanent Speciality Commission (PSC)* responsible for the DSD in question.

The **request** shall be sent in digital format to solicitari.evaluate@aracis.ro, together with its annexes, which shall be sent in digital format by uploading them on the **electronic evaluation platform**.

The DAC expert and the representative of the *Institutional Relations and Digitalisation Service (SRII)* shall provide support with publishing the internal evaluation documents on the platform. The DAC expert shall check the compliance of these documents with the provisions of the *Guide*. If the IER is not compliant, the DAC expert shall ask the HEI to remake or add the necessary documents within no more than **15 days** after sending the request.

Within no more than **7 days** after receiving the request, ARACIS, through the SRII, shall send the **external evaluation service contract** to the EI to sign it. The **external evaluation service** contract, hereinafter the contract, includes provisions regarding the applicable regulatory framework, the parties involved, the object of the contract, the duration and how to modify it, the value, obligations of the parties, how to communicate, information confidentiality and personal data protection, contract termination, force majeure, appeals, petitions and disputes, as well as any other elements required for delivering the evaluation services.

4.2. Establishing the membership and appointing the members of the External Evaluation Experts' Panel

Within no more than **15 days** from signing the service contract, ARACIS shall appoint an **external evaluation experts' panel**, hereinafter the **panel**, composed of:

- a) one expert evaluator, professor, member in the National Register of Expert Evaluators (professors) (**RNE – CD**), qualified to be a PhD supervisor in the evaluated DSD or in a similar domain, who shall be the coordinator of the evaluation panel;
- b) one expert evaluator, professor, member in the National Register of International Expert Evaluators (RNE-EI), who, as a rule, is a PhD supervisor in the evaluated DSD or a similar domain or appointed by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (ANACEC), in which case he/she is a PhD supervisor in the evaluated DSD or a similar domain; this expert evaluator shall join the evaluation panel as a member;
- c) a doctoral student in the evaluated DSD or a similar domain, who is a member in the National Register of Student Expert Evaluators (**RNE-S**) or is appointed by ANACEC, with the role of member of the evaluation panel.

For industrial doctoral studies, the expert panel may include an employers' representative, member in the National Register of Expert Evaluators who are employer's representatives or appointed by ANACEC.

Experts' appointment shall comply with the Code of ethics and rules of conduct in the activities carried out by ARACIS in assuring and evaluation the quality of higher education in Romania.

The list of panel members shall be sent to the HEI for information purposes; within no more than **5 days** after receiving the information letter, the HEI may request one or several members of the panel to be replaced, in thoroughly justified situations.

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

Within no more than **5 days** after appointment of the panel members, the panel members shall be granted access to the ARACIS evaluation platform, where they shall have access to the IER. The DAC expert shall support the panel members with accessing the IER.

The members of the expert panel shall analyse the IER and, if necessary, within no more than **10 days** after accessing the report on the evaluation platform, may request the HEI to provide clarifications or additional information about the elements mentioned in the report. The HEI shall respond to such requests within no more than **5 days**.

Should the international quality evaluation expert request a translation of certain documents, such request shall be communicated to the HEI, and a reasonable deadline for such translation shall be agreed upon.

4.4. On-site visit

The EI contact person and the coordinator of the expert panel shall agree on the date of the on-site visit, within no more than **30 days** after signing the contract. The visit shall be conducted within no more than **2.5 months** after signing the contract. The duration of the visit shall be **2-3 days**, and the agenda of the on-site visit shall be established, as a rule, at least **15 days** before the visit.

During the on-site visit, the panel shall check that the information contained in the IER is **true to the reality**, including by visiting the venues where the learning, teaching and research activities are conducted, and have **discussions** with the representatives of the HEI and the stakeholders to assess the level of fulfilment of the standards and performance indicators. Furthermore, the panel shall have discussions with representatives of the management of the HEI, the institution's PhD supervisors, doctoral students, alumni, employers or other stakeholders.

Annex 4 to this guide includes **recommendations concerning the activities to be conducted during the visit**. During the on-site visit, depending on the findings, the members of the panel may request any additional meetings, if they deem that no sufficient data is available for them to substantiate their assessments regarding the level of fulfilment of the standards and performance indicators. Requests shall be made so that the HEI has reasonable time to organise such additional meetings.

The coordinator of the panel shall coordinate the discussions within the on-site visit and seek to ensure balanced engagement of all participants. To this purpose, it is recommended to have **no more than 10-12 persons in a meeting**, and the name and position of each participant, as well as the capacity in which they attend the meeting should be communicated to the panel coordinator before the visit. The meetings shall only be attended by persons who are part of the category for which the meeting is organised, as communicated before the meeting. One of the panel members shall draft the minute of the meetings.

The on-site visit of the expert 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 panel may request **additional information and documents** from the representatives of the evaluated institution, provided that these are already in the possession of the HEI by nature of its activity, or that they can be made and sent before the end of the visit.

In exceptional, thoroughly substantiated cases, with the approval of the ARACIS Council, the on-site visit or some of the activities of the visit can be organised **online or in blended format**.

4.5. Drafting of the External Evaluation Report (EER), and assessments on the level to which indicators are fulfilled

The panel shall draft the *External evaluation report*, hereinafter the EER, within no more than **20 days** after the end of the on-site visit, in Romanian or English language. The report shall include a presentation of the state of facts, analyses and conclusions about the extent to which the indicators are fulfilled, based on the presented data and evidence, by comparison with the definition of the performance indicators, the adequate standards and, as applicable, the standards defined in **art. 18** para. (1) letter b) and c) of the *Methodology*.

The EER shall be based on a review of the IER, the findings during the on-site visit, and the additional documents provided before the end of the visit.

According to **art. 63** para. (2) of the *Methodology*, the results of the evaluation for each performance indicator shall be as follows:

- a) **fulfilled**, when all the aspects included in its description have been met;
- b) **partially fulfilled**, when key aspects included in its description are failed, but can be corrected within no more than 1 year;
- c) **unfulfilled**, when all the aspects in its description are failed and there is no prospect for them to be fulfilled within no more than 1 year.

The EER also includes **recommendations** for improving the future activity of the DSD, at least for the indicators assessed as partially fulfilled or unfulfilled. The recommendations shall consider the context in which doctoral studies are delivered, as well as any specific elements, such as elements related to the specific doctoral study domain, the location, the profile of the doctoral students. It should be possible to implement the recommendations during the period before the follow-up evaluation or the periodic evaluation; the recommendations should be expressed in clear points, so that the HEI can know exactly what they need to do to implement each recommendation.

The report shall be drafted in Romanian or English language, according to the template provided in **Annex 5** to this Guide. The members of the panel shall collaborate on the ARACIS evaluation platform to draft the EER together. The report should not exceed **25 pages**, annexes excluded. The schedule of the on-site visit and the list of the reviewed documents should be enclosed to the report.

4.6. Consultation with the HEI on the EER

Within no more than **25 days** after the end of the on-site visit, the coordinator of the expert panel shall send the draft EER to the contact person appointed by the HEI for the DSD for comments on any clerical errors, and the expert in charge from the *Quality Assurance Direction (DAC)* shall be informed.

The reply of the HEI shall be sent by the contact person to the coordinator of the evaluation panel, within no more than **5 days** after receiving the draft EER, and the expert in charge from the *Quality Assurance Direction (DAC)* shall be informed.

The expert evaluator panel shall finalise the EER within no more than **5 days**, and if necessary, integrate the received feedback; subsequently, the panel coordinator shall inform the DAC expert that the report is finalised and available on the evaluation platform.

4.7. Analysis in the Permanent Speciality Commission, and draft decision

The DAC expert shall grant access to the EER on the evaluation platform to the members of the PSC that oversees the doctoral domain in question. If required, in the case of interdisciplinary study domains, upon request of the chair of the PSC, the inspector shall send the EER to be reviewed by members of other PSC(s).

The PSC shall analyse the EER and, exceptionally, may make reasonable requests to panel members to complement and/or remake the EER if it finds that the provisions of the Methodology and/or of the Guide have not been complied with or the EER does not contain sufficient data and evidence to allow for a decision to be made. The expert panel shall reply within no more than **5 days** and amend the EER accordingly or provide a reasoning if changes are not considered necessary. If applicable, the **amended EER** is resent to the **HEI for review**, according to stage **4.6**.

The PSC shall debate on the EER in a meeting, validate the results of the evaluation regarding the extent to which the performance indicators have been met, and passes the draft decision by open vote, with a majority of the votes calculated from the total number of members entitled to vote. The draft decision shall be noted in a **minute** that will include the reasoning of the proposed decision, as well as a summary of the debates of the PSC. The PSC shall finalise its analysis within no more than **15 days** after receiving the final version of the EER.

4.8. Analysis by the Department of Evaluation of University Studies and the ARACIS Council; passing of the decision

After the draft decision is passed, according to section 4.7, members of the ARACIS Council shall be given access to the EER and the minute of the PSC on the evaluation platform by the DAC expert. Within no more than **15 days** after receiving the minute of the PSC, the members of the Department of Evaluation of University Studies (DESU) shall analyse the draft decision in a meeting, and the summary of the debates and the opinion of the DESU on the draft decision shall be noted in the **minute** of the meeting.

The ARACIS Council shall analyse the draft decision of the PSC and the opinion of the DESU, within no more than **15 days** after receiving the report of the PSC, and validate the draft decision based on checking the compliance with the **Methodology**, through an open vote, with a majority of votes calculated from the total number of members.

The ARACIS Council may request the PSC to remake the minute if they find that the provisions of the **Methodology** have not been complied with or the draft decision is not duly substantiated. Furthermore, the ARACIS Council may ask the panel members to remake the EER, if the Council finds that the provisions of the **Methodology** and/or of this Guide have not been complied with or that the report does not include sufficient data and evidence to enable the decision to be passed. The PSC and the panel shall respond to such request within no more than **10 days**.

Based on the final version of the EER, the minute of the PSC meeting, and the minute of the DESU meeting, the ARACIS Council shall validate the panel's draft decision by open ballot and pass the decision on meeting or failure to meet the standards.

The decision shall be communicated to the HEI and the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova by e-mail within no more than **30 days** after being passed.

A decision of non-compliance with the standards shall be adopted when:

- "a) a standard is not fulfilled;*
- b) more than 20% of the performance indicators included in the annex are partially fulfilled;*
- c) more than 10% of the performance indicators included in the annex are partially fulfilled, and they belong to the same evaluation domain."*

A standard is unfulfilled when all indicators through which that standard is described are unfulfilled. If any performance indicators are assessed as unfulfilled, except for the situation when failure to fulfil the indicators leads to failure to fulfil a standard, such indicators shall be taken into account when analysing whether the standards are fulfilled or unfulfilled.

Thus, a decision regarding failure to fulfil the standards shall be passed, as applicable, in the circumstances presented in the table below:

Total number of indicators	Number of partially fulfilled / unfulfilled performance indicators	
	Belonging to any evaluation domain	Belonging to the same evaluation domain
34	more than 7	more than 4

After a DSD has undergone an evaluation procedure for accreditation, the ARACIS Council shall pass one of the following decisions, as applicable:

- accreditation** (AC), when ascertained that the standards have been fulfilled;
- non-accreditation** (NAC), when ascertained that the standards are not fulfilled.

4.9. Appeals and complaints

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

4.10. Publishing the EER

After the final decision is passed by the ARACIS Council and any appeals are settled, if applicable, the EER and the Decision of the ARACIS Council shall be published on the ARACIS website and on the DEQAR website. The report shall include the name of the external quality evaluation experts, members of the panel, and shall be published in both English and Romanian language.

5. Follow-up evaluation activities

5.1. Purpose

The follow-up evaluation process seeks to support the HEI in the process of improving the quality of their teaching and research/innovation activities conducted within the DSD. Furthermore, the follow-up evaluation assesses the extent to which the recommendations given during the external evaluation process have been implemented by the HEI, and checks that the aspects related to the performance indicators evaluated as partially fulfilled have been remedied.

5.2. Drafting and sending of the progress report

Following a decision to grant an accreditation, the HEI has the obligation to send ARACIS a progress report (PR), by uploading it on the electronic evaluation platform, after no more than **two years, but no less than one year** after the decision of the ARACIS Council is communicated.

Such report shall detail how the HEI implemented the recommendations made in the EER, and shall be drafted in Romanian language, as per **Annex 6** to this Guide.

5.3. Appointing the expert evaluator; drafting and discussing the follow-up evaluation report

The PR shall be analysed by an external quality evaluation expert, usually one of the experts involved in the external quality evaluation procedure of the DSD in question. If the progress report is incomplete or contains insufficient data and evidence, the expert shall ask the evaluated institution for clarifications and/or additions.

The expert shall draft their own follow-up report (FR), in Romanian language, as per **Annex 7** to this Guide, on the electronic evaluation platform of ARACIS. The content of the FR shall be discussed with the

representatives of the HEI in a meeting that is usually organised online. A joint meeting with several HEIs organising doctoral studies in the same domain can be organised to enable experience and best practice sharing.

5.4. Validation of the follow-up evaluation report

The PSC shall analyse and validate the follow-up evaluation report in a meeting. The results of the validation shall be noted in the minute of the meeting.

The minute of the PSC shall be analysed by DESU and the ARACIS Council, and the Council shall issue a decision that will be communicated to the EI within no more than **45 days** after passing.

The follow-up evaluation report shall be published on the ARACIS website.

Approved by

Decision of the ARACIS Council no. 225/H/30.07.2026