ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

ROMANIAN AGENCY FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION (ARACIS)

BRYAN MAGUIRE, TERHI NOKKALA, CATY DUYKAERTS, ANA GVRITISHVILI
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This targeted review report analyses the compliance of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ARACIS (Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2015) following the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews. The purpose of this targeted review is to ensure ARACIS's compliance with the ESG in order to renew ARACIS's membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and its registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The review was conducted in the period from October 2022 to September 2023, with a site visit conducted between 15th and 17th March 2023.

Established in 2005 ARACIS is the higher education quality assurance agency of Romania. The mission of ARACIS is to "carry out the quality external evaluation of education provided by higher education institutions and by other organisations providing higher education study programmes, which operates in Romania with the aim of:

- certifying, according to quality standards, the capacity of education providing organisations to fulfil the beneficiaries' expectations;
- contributing to the development of an institutional culture of higher education quality;
- assuring the protection of direct beneficiaries of study programmes at higher education level by producing and disseminating systematic, coherent and credible information, publicly accessible, about education quality;
- proposing to the Ministry of Education of Romania strategies and policies of permanently improving higher education quality, in close correlation with pre-university education."

ARACIS offers the following external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Programme Authorisation (First Cycle)
- Programme Accreditation (First Cycle)
- Programme Accreditation and awarding of EUR-ACE Label (First Cycle)
- Programme Accreditation (Second Cycle)
- Study domain Accreditation (Second Cycle)
- Study domain accreditation (Third Cycle)
- Institutional Evaluation
- Evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD)
- Joint programme evaluations

In accordance with the Terms of Reference, this targeted review has evaluated the extent to which ARACIS continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The focus areas addressed include those ESGs with a partial compliance conclusion in the EQAR Register Committee's decision, namely ESG 2.7 (Complaints and appeals) and ESG 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct). Additionally, ESG 2.1 has been addressed for all ARACIS's activities within the scope of ESG's; and the ESGs 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6. and 2.7 have been addressed for the activities that were introduced after the last review of the agency, namely periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD); periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains (DSD); and Evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain.

As per the guidelines for ENQA targeted reviews ARACIS has selected one enhancement area, ESG 2.2, Designing methodologies fit for purpose. ARACIS operates within a national system and culture of public administration that is characterised by a high level of specification; but nevertheless the agency has been successful in influencing the development of the law within Romania. Alongside its technical

expertise, another of the reasons the agency is able to have influence is because of its systematic approach to stakeholder engagement.

The demands of external quality assurance in Romania, as in other mature national systems, are changing. The maturing of internal quality assurance of the universities affords an opportunity for a reduction in the volume and intensity of external quality assurance. The recent experience of evaluating doctoral institutions and domains gives some pointers for the development of methodologies fit for purpose in the future. A notable feature is the streamlined set of indicators used in this process. The use of a digital platform and international experts are another element that can be replicated. New kinds of programs, such as micro credentials and short cycle degrees, as well as the quality assurance of European Universities offer the opportunity for additional experimentation and development of methodologies. Developing methodologies fit for purpose in programmes delivered in branch campuses and online also deserve consideration.

Summary of agency's compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3)

ESG	Compliance according to the targeted review[1]	Compliance transferred from the last full review[2]
2.1	Compliant	N/A
2.2	Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only)	Substantially compliant -> Compliant (for old QA activities only)
2.3	Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only)	Fully compliant -> Compliant (for old QA activities only)
2.4	Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only)	Fully compliant -> Compliant (for old QA activities only)
2.5	Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only)	Fully compliant-> Compliant (for old QA activities only)
2.6	Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only)	Partially compliant -> Compliant
2.7	Compliant	

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[1] Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark "for new or changed QA activities only" is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

[2] Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.

3.1	Not included in the targeted review	Partially compliant -> Compliant
3.2	Not included in the targeted review	Fully compliant -> Compliant
3.3	Not included in the targeted review	Fully compliant -> Compliant
3.4	Not included in the targeted review	Fully compliant -> Compliant
3.5	Not included in the targeted review	Substantially compliant -> Compliant
3.6	Compliant	
3.7		Fully compliant ->Compliant

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior ARACIS) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted in the period between October 2022 and September 2023 and should be read together with the external review report of the agency's last full review against the ESG.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

As the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has undergone three successful reviews against the ESG Parts 2 and 3, it is eligible and has opted for a targeted review. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant renewal of registration in EQAR in 2019 and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes[3] during the past five years while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ARACIS is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Programme Authorisation (First Cycle)
- Programme Accreditation (First Cycle)
- Programme Accreditation and awarding of EUR-ACE Label (First Cycle)
- Programme Accreditation (Second Cycle)
- Study domain Accreditation (Second Cycle)
- Study domain accreditation (Third Cycle)
- Institutional Evaluation
- Evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD)
- Joint programme evaluations

According to the Terms of Reference, this targeted review will evaluate the extent to which ARACIS continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The review covers the following areas:

- Those ESGs with a partial compliance conclusion in the EQAR Register Committee's decision, namely ESG 2.7 (Complaints and appeals) and ESG 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct)   for all activities of ARACIS.
- Additionally, ESGs 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities that were introduced after the last review of the agency, namely Periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral

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[3] e.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

study programmes (IOSUD); periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains (DSD); and Evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain.

- Additionally, the ESG 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance) will be evaluated for all activities of ARACIS.
- Selected enhancement area: ESG 2.2 (Designing methodologies fit for purpose).

The targeted review may also address any matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG. In the case of ARACIS's targeted review, the review panel did not identify any matters regarding ESG compliance that would need to be covered apart from the ones listed above and addressed in the ToR.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2018 REVIEW

According to the decision of the EQAR Register Committee based on the previous full review conducted in 2018; that ARACIS was found to be in compliance with the following standards.

ESG Part 2: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6

ESG Part 3: 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7

ARACIS was found to be in partial compliance with ESG 2.7 and ESG 3.6.

The panel acknowledges through the triangulation of evidence that no other changes occurred within the agency and thus acknowledges the status of the following ESG standards from the last full review:

ESG Part 2: 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2,5, 2.6

ESG Part 3: 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2023 external targeted review of ARACIS was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of ARACIS was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Bryan Maguire (Chair), Director of Quality Integration at QQI, Ireland (ENQA nominee);
- Terhi Nokkala (Secretary), Senior researcher, University of Jyväskylä, Finland (EUA nominee);
- Caty Duykaerts, Director of AEQES, Belgium
- Ana Gvritishvili, Member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

Alexis Fábregas Almirall (Project officer), acted as the review coordinator.

This targeted review of ARACIS began with the tripartite agreement on the Terms of References (ToR), followed by ARACIS preparing and submitting its self-assessment report (SAR). The ENQA review panel received the SAR on 16th January 2023. The briefing meeting with the review coordinator was organised on 8th February 2023. The review panel furthermore held a preparatory meeting with the agency on 3rd March 2023 and internal preparatory meeting on the same day.

The review panel studied the SAR and all the relevant documentation and conducted an in-person site-visit from 15th to 17th March 2023 to interview ARACIS's internal and external stakeholders, to add further evidence and clarify various details, as well as to deepen their understanding of the agency.

The aim of the meetings conducted during the site visit was to provide further evidence and clarify the information acquired from document material. Based on all the collected information, and the review panels' internal deliberation during and after the site visit, the panel jointly and unanimously produced this review report in the period between site visit and May 2023. As part of the report writing process, the panel provided an opportunity for ARACIS to comment on the factual accuracy of the draft report.

Self-assessment report

According to the SAR (p 4), ARACIS Council appointed a team in January 2022 to prepare the self-assessment report. The team comprised ARACIS's main stakeholders – students, employers, teachers' unions, as well as representatives of ARACIS Council and the permanent staff. The Council similarly selected Standard 2.2. as the enhancement area of the targeted review. The practical work of elaborating the SAR was done by the SAR team members in collaboration with the ARACIS staff; and the ARACIS Council was periodically informed of the process as well as were asked to contribute to the SWOT analysis and comment on the draft version of the SAR. Further consultations were organised with the Ministry of Education as well as with the Consultative Commission representing the National Council of Rectors (CNR), The composition of the SAR team was amended in October 2022 as some members had become unavailable. The final version of the SAR was approved by the ARACIS Council in December 2022.

The SAR described the changes in ARACIS's activities and organisation as well as the evaluations ARACIS has performed since the previous ENQA review. Furthermore, the SAR includes a description of ARACIS's activities, changes and methodology pertaining to those standards (3.6 and 2.7) on which ARACIS was found partially compliant by the EQAR Register Committee in 2019. Special attention was dedicated to the ESG compliance of the new activities introduced since the previous review, as well as the enhancement area chosen by ARACIS, ESG 2.2. The SAR also included links to all relevant additional documentation and information. Together with the additional documentation, the SAR provides a basis for conducting the targeted review.

Site visit

In preparation of the site visit, the review panel studied the SAR and the documentation prepared by the agency. The review panel also asked for further documentation before and during the site visit; and these requests were always smoothly and expediently met by ARACIS.

The site visit took place between 15th and 17th of March 2023. Prior to the site visit, the review panel held a preparatory meeting with ARACIS's designated resource persons. The panel similarly held an internal preparatory meeting on 3rd March to plan the interviews as well as to request any additional documentation.

During the site visit, the review panel conducted 11 meetings with the internal bodies and external stakeholders of ARACIS. These meetings included sessions with the:

- The Council President, the COUNCIL Vice-President and the General Director of ARACIS

- Senior management team of ARACIS
- ARACIS staff responsible for the enhancement area
- ARACIS staff responsible for quality assurance activities
- ARACIS Council, Ethics Commission and Permanent Appeals Commission
- ARACIS Speciality Commissions
- The Minister of Education of Romania and members of the Minister's cabinet,
- Rectors and Vice-rectors of the higher education institutions evaluated by ARACIS
- Quality assurance officers of the higher education institutions evaluated by ARACIS
- Reviewers of ARACIS
- Social Partners of ARACIS

A full list of meetings including the positions of interviewees, can be found in Annex 1.

The site visit took place in a friendly, frank, and open atmosphere. The panel notes that all ARACIS staff and stakeholders were candid and supportive of both the review process, and the review panel. The panel wants to extend their heartfelt thanks for all involved for the warm welcome they gave to the panel.

CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

According to the ARACIS Self-assessment report (p.5-7), there were a number of changes in ARACIS and its operational environment.

The revised Methodology for external evaluation, standards, standards of reference and the list of performance indicators prepared by ARACIS to implement the provisions of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015 (ESG) were approved by the Government decision in January 2018.

The national legislation on education was amended through the Emergency Ordinance no. 22/31.03.2021 to enable the development of joint programmes and allow for accreditation using the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. The same ordinance also contained provisions for HEIs to have a dedicated department in charge of internal quality assurance and allow the increase of the number of student members to the internal quality assurance commissions.

ARACIS' ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

First, a revision of the Regulation on the Organization and Operation of ARACIS took place in 2021-2022; following a project coordinated by the Ministry of Education of Romania titled Improving public policies in higher education and enhancing the quality of regulations by updating quality standards - QAFIN, to which also the World Bank contributed. The revision of the regulations resulted in specifically from the provisions in a report titled Recommendation for the Regulation of Organization and Functioning of the Recipient. The document in question contains provisions on the role and tasks of each of the ARACIS governing bodies as well as its organisational units. According to SAR (p. 5), the revision established a research office within ARACIS; as well as creating several new organisational units within the Quality Assurance Direction. The new units are 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. Furthermore, the tasks related to various positions were also revised to better distinguish between strategic and executive roles.

Second, the number of ARACIS' permanent staff members increased over the period between 2018 and 2022 from 33 to 58. A new General Director was appointed and started her term in January 2022. Eleven new ARACIS Council members started their terms in January 2022; as the term of the previous members came to an end.

ARACIS' FUNDING

According to the budget provided by ARACIS, the agency's income comprises primarily the fees of the evaluation activities, with project funding and interest of bank deposits constituting other sources of income. There has been relatively large fluctuation in the overall income over the five-year period since the 2018 ENQA evaluation, attributable to the changing amounts of project funding and income from evaluation fees. According to the explanation provided by ARACIS, the evaluation fees are tied to the professorial salary level, as per the Government DECISION no. 1731 of December 6, 2006 "*for the approval of fees for authorization and accreditation of higher education institutions' study programs and for external assessment of the quality of education perceived by the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education*". The evaluation fees remained unchanged from 2006 to 2019, with a 10% increase in 2019, and an increase of 250% starting March 2023; given the significant increase in professorial salaries over a period of time.

The largest categories of expenditure are expert fees, staff salaries and the fees of the council members, of which the first two have increased significantly over the years. However, the overall operating result has stayed stable. The expert fees were significantly increased in 2019; and the fees received by national and international experts were harmonised. Furthermore, a fixed amount of travel expenditure was included in the fee.

In its SWOT analysis, ARACIS mentions the low staff salaries as weakness; and the Agency staff moving to other positions outside the agency due to low salaries as a potential threat. The salaries of public officials are established though national regulations and are not within the agency's mandate to determine.

ARACIS' FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

Since the previous review took place; ARACIS has introduced three new evaluation activities pertaining to the evaluation of the doctoral studies (third cycle). According to the SAR (p. 6), the evaluation of doctoral studies was originally mandated by the Law on National Education in 2011; however, according to the General Director, the process of implementing the law in this regard was slowed down by originally unclear provisions and several resulting changes to the law as well as the minister responsible for higher education changing several times in the course of some years. In 2021, the Constitutional Court of Romania finally mandated the ARACIS to complete the evaluations by the end of the 2021. The last amendments to the law in the field of doctoral studies were approved on March 30th, 2021. On April 14th 2021, the Minister of Education approved the Methodology and the related criteria, standards and performance indicators and, after the swift approval of the evaluation guides by ARACIS all accreditations of existing doctoral study domains (DSD, 398 altogether) and evaluations of institution organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD, 50 altogether) were conducted between May and December 2021. Furthermore, in 2022, ARACIS performed the authorisation of 14 new doctoral study domains.

The evaluation of doctoral studies comprises three different procedures;

First, the evaluation of the organisational framework, named "the institution organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD)" - periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD). This procedure aims at ascertaining that the organisations have the adequate institutional capacity, educational effectiveness, and quality management systems in place to successfully organise doctoral degree programmes.

Second, periodic external evaluation of the doctoral study domains (DSD) in which the doctoral study programmes are organised. Similar to the IOSUD evaluation, the evaluation of doctoral domains similarly aims to ascertain the existence and adequacy institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management systems but at the level of doctoral study domains; that is, disciplinary areas responsible for doctoral programmes in a particular discipline.

Third, evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain. This process is similar to the DSD evaluation, but pertains to the first time of establishing a new domain, rather than periodic evaluation of an existing domain.

External reviews carried out by ARACIS (SAR p. 6)

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	1744
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	1151	703	3277

Due to the COVD-19 pandemic, ARACIS evaluations took place in an online or hybrid mode between March 2020 and March 2022. Additionally, since March 2020 it was decided that the work of ARACIS Council and the Permanent Speciality Experts' Commissions (PSEC) can take place online or through a hybrid online working method, and ARACIS permanent staff was also allowed to work from home.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF ARACIS WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 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.

2018 review recommendation

The ENQA review panel stated the following:

ARACIS should 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.

The EQAR Register Committee stated the following:

While the Register Committee welcomed the hiring of new staff to support the agency's IQA procedures, the Committee noted that the hiring process has yet to be finalised and that the changes to the IQA have yet to be implemented in practice. The Committee also underlined the need to ensure 'searchable digital copies' of review reports to facilitate the decision making of the Permanent Speciality Commission. The Register Committee therefore could not follow the panel's conclusion of compliance, and considered that ARACIS complies only partially with ESG 3.6.

Evidence

Regulatory and organisational framework of IQA

The foundation of the ARACIS internal quality assurance system is laid out by the primary and secondary national legislation: Law of National Education no. 1/2011, Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education as well as Internal Management Control Code for public entities established by the Order no. 600/20 April 2018. Furthermore, the internal quality assurance is described in the Internal Quality Assurance Policy[4].

The internal organisation of ARACIS, including a description of the role and tasks of the different governing bodies and administrative units of ARACIS, are listed in a document titled Regulation on the Organization and Operation of ARACIS. This document was revised in 2021-2022, as part of a larger QAFIN project coordinated by the Ministry of Education and aimed at improving the quality assurance

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[4] ARACIS_Policy-Declaration-for-internal-quality-assurance.pdf

system in Romania. In the process towards the revision, the World Bank experts conducted a survey and a set of interviews amongst ARACIS staff and the Executive Board to collect information on the organisations' internal management, such as staff recruitment, career development motivation, setting organisational objectives, individual performance management and skills. It was also ensured that the revised organisational regulations were in line with national legislative provisions for public institutions.

As stated in the SAR, ARACIS has a number of operational guidelines and policies that ensure that the activities of the agency are organised in accordance with the national legislation and the ESGs and that they are carried out in an efficient and effective manner. These include the Internal Management Control Standards, Internal Quality Assurance Policy, Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct, and Plan for Gender Equality, as well as the Internal Public Audit Methodology and Internal Audit Charter and the related documents, Multiannual (2022-2024) and Annual Internal Public Audit Plans, Additionally, the SAR states that a Procedures Manual was developed in the contexts of the QAFIN-project to outline and clarify the respective roles of ARACIS on the one hand and the Ministry of Education and its subordinate commissions, in terms of quality assurance. Furthermore, there are several policies and guidelines pertaining to ARACIS' external quality assurance activities, such as the evaluation guidelines for the different types of evaluation activities, a policy outlining the appointment procedure of the evaluation panel members, or a procedure outlining the appeals and complaints process.

The main decision making body is the ARACIS Council, which decides on the main strategic objectives and operational guidelines and procedures as well as oversees the operations of the agency. The day to day activities are carried out by the ARACIS permanent staff; and together these two bodies are responsible for the core management and support processes of ARACIS. According to the SAR (p. 9), the bodies specifically in charge of the Internal Management Control System are the Monitoring Commission and Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office. The former comprises the heads of ARACIS' various internal departments, and operating according to the principles set by a national Order no 600/20th April 2018 on the Internal Management Control Code for public Entities. The Monitoring Commission is responsible for monitoring the functioning of the internal quality assurance system and coordinating the updating of its related policies. The Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office at ARACIS is tasked with drafting all ARACIS procedures and guidelines related to internal quality assurance for the adoption by the relevant decision-making bodies, such as the ARACIS Council. During the site visit, the General Director explained that once the procedures are adopted, the Public Audit Compartment is tasked with ensuring that the procedures are followed. In this task, the auditor is guided by the agency's Multiannual and Annual Internal Public Audit Plans. If necessary, revisions are made to the procedures, or to the internal practices. The General Director told the panel that she tries to emphasise communication amongst the staff when procedures and guidelines are being introduced or revised to ensure that they meet the needs of the agency and that all staff are knowledgeable about them.

As stated in the SAR (p. 9) and confirmed by the interview with the General Director, the Public Audit Compartment staff is completely independent from the rest of ARACIS in its auditing function, as per the Law no. 672/19 December 2002[5] regarding internal public audit. The Public Audit Compartment currently employs one staff member, who was hired in 2021 via an open call for applications. Hiring a second auditor, as required by the law, was hampered first by ARACIS receiving no applications for the open call for applications organised in 2022; and by a moratorium on hiring employees for public institutions that lasted until the end of 2022. The General Director told the panel that ARACIS is looking to organise another open call for application in the Spring 2023 to hire a second auditor.

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[5] LEGE 672 19/12/2002 - Portal Legislativ (just.ro)

ARACIS has a well-functioning internal quality assurance loop. According to the ARACIS SAR (p. 9), the staff members related to the internal quality assurance activities undergo regular training to update their expertise. Both the SAR (p. 13) and the interview conducted by the panel indicate that all aspects related to the internal quality assurance processes are implemented in practice. ARACIS is aware of the need to continuously revise procedures to adapt ARACIS activities to the changing legislation, such as currently for instance to the new public finance law. Extensive staff feedback was collected within the context of the QAFIN project; and feedback from evaluated higher education institutions and members of the evaluation panels through a survey platform. According to the SAR (p. 13), the ARACIS staff members coordinating the respective evaluations send the questionnaires 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 based on that.

Internal quality assurance of ARACIS's EQA activities

According to the ARACIS SAR, (p. 12) the external evaluation decisions are made by the ARACIS council, based on the reports of the Permanent Speciality Commissions, PSECs. ARACIS has 13 disciplinary PSECs, each comprising 7-13 members, including academics, as well as a student representative and in some commissions also an industry representative). All PSEC members are appointed amongst the evaluators registered in the National Register of Evaluators. Each PSEC has a chair and a secretary and are supported by one or two ARACIS staff members. The PSEC chair and secretary suggest the composition of the external evaluation panels, who are then formally appointed by the ARACIS council. One member of the external evaluation panel is always a member of the relevant PSEC. The role of the PSEC member is to ensure that the evaluation methodologies are interpreted and implemented in a consistent way across the different evaluation panels. The PSEC usually meets monthly to discuss the external evaluation report; the PSEC members can also access to the documentation provided by the university on demand.All documentation is provided to the PSEC members in a searchable electronic format via the ARACIS cloud, implemented in 2019. The ARACIS cloud is also used by the ARACIS staff and Council; and in case of the evaluations of doctoral studies, also the higher education institutions are able to upload the documentation directly to the cloud without needing to send them to the agency by traditional mail. To facilitate the ease of receiving and distributing the documentation related to evaluations, ARACIS has plans to introduce a digital platform where all evaluation processes could be supported from start to finish.

The respective PSEC members acting as members of a given evaluation panel present the evaluation for the deliberation of the PSEC. The external evaluation reports are discussed by the PSEC, which then writes a report and proposes the decision to the ARACIS Council, The PSEC president presents each evaluation in the ARACIS Council for their final decision.

In order to ensure the integrity of the agency's activities, ARACIS also has a Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct which is available on the ARACIS website. It outlines the agency's fundamental values, principles, and rules of conduct, and includes provisions pertaining to possible infringement of the code; declarations of avoiding conflicts of interest in the external evaluation activities, as well as declarations pertaining to impartiality, confidentiality, and competence. The panel was told that all ARACIS evaluators must sign the declarations.

Analysis

<u>Regulatory and organisational framework of IQA</u>

According to the evidence presented, the internal quality assurance system of ARACIS is based on having specific documentation that describes all of ARACIS' procedures and activities. Most of these derive directly from the prescriptions of the national legal framework of primarily and secondary legislation. Internally, ARACIS has structures and related personnel to draft, adopt, implement, and audit those procedures. Having discussed with the ARACIS auditor and representative of the Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office, as well as with the General Director the panel is convinced that ARACIS has an effective framework of both relevant documentation, structures and personnel to draft, implement and audit their procedures, and to make changes as is necessary. IQA is fully implemented according to the current procedures. Those procedures are constantly updated both as a response to external needs (arising from legislative changes) and as a response to internal needs for changes recognised by ARACIS itself. ARACIS is also aware of future needs for changing its procedures according to the changing legislation.

<u>Internal quality assurance of ARACIS's EQA activities</u>

ARACIS has necessary procedures and documentation, including a Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct in place to ensure the integrity of its evaluations. The panel interviewed the agency staff and external reviewers, who confirmed that the external reviewers had to sign an ethics declaration (annex to the Code of Ethics) and have received training for their evaluation tasks. The members of the PSECs furthermore confirmed the process of appointing the evaluation panel members and how they ensured consistency across reports. The PSEC members furthermore confirmed that they have access to all material pertaining to the evaluations within their committees' remit in electronic searchable format through the ARACIS cloud. Furthermore, ARACIS is already receiving the evaluation documentation for evaluations of doctoral studies from the higher education institutions through the ARACIS cloud and has plans to further digitise the evaluation process. This will further facilitate the ease of managing the evaluation documentation both for the higher education institutions, evaluators, as well as ARACIS bodies and staff.

The panel concludes that ARACIS has adequate personnel in place for IQA, including having recruited a public auditor; and that all parts of the current IQA are implemented; with revisions taken as necessary. While the current lack of a second auditor is a defect in terms of Romanian administrative law, it does not compromise the adequacy or effectiveness of the function in terms of ESG. The panel furthermore concludes that ARACIS has implemented a cloud through which it provides searchable electronic copies to the PSEC members. Thus, ARACIS has implemented changes required in the previous ENQA review and the EQAR register committee pertaining to standard 3.6.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

The ESGs part 2 are covered in this review as follows:

- ESG 2.1 is covered for all activities, as per the general procedure of targeted reviews.
- ESG 2.7 is covered for all activities as ARACIS was found partially compliant in terms of 2.7 in the previous review.

- ESGs 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6 are covered for the new activities, namely periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD); periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains (DSD); and evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain. There have been no changes pertaining to the activities covered by the previous ENQA review.

ESG 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.

2018 review recommendation

The ENQA review panel stated the following:

ARACIS should cease to treat 'learning outcomes' and 'competences' as synonymous in its evaluation methods;

ARACIS should develop a manual to disseminate the concept of learning outcomes to its evaluators and to higher education institutions in Romania.

The EQAR Register Committee stated the following in response to the substantive change report 15.12. 2021:

The Committee considered the mapping of the standards against the ESG 1.1-1.10 and noted that some standards may not be sufficiently addressed (ESG 1.2 & ESG 1.9). The Committee underlined that the next external review of ARACIS should pay particular attention to the coverage of ESG Part 1 and how it is addressed within the review reports produced by ARACIS (ESG 2.1).

During the upcoming external review of ARACIS renewal of registration, the Register Committee expects that the following issues to be specifically analysed by the review panel:

i. How ARACIS ensures sufficient coverage of ESG Part 1 in its evaluation of doctoral procedures (ESG 2.1);

Evidence

ARACIS performs various external quality assurance activities such as institutional and program evaluations. 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. In terms of institutional and program evaluations at the Bachelor and Master levels, there have been no significant changes since the previous ENQA evaluation. However, the agency has introduced and implemented three new procedures since 2021.

- 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 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.

According to the SAR, there have not been any changes in the criteria used for the activities previously assessed in 2018. The panel was able to confirm this in the interviews with ARACIS representatives who affirmed that criteria and standards for Institutional Evaluation, Program Authorization/Accreditation (First/Second Cycles), Study domain accreditation and awarding of EUR-ACE Label have remained the same since 2018. The expert panel also studied the SAR from the previous ENQA evaluation of the agency, where the compliance of existing external evaluation standards with the ESG Part 1 was indicated.

Additionally, the compliance of newly-adopted criteria, standards, and indicators was also verified, given that the representatives of both the agency and the higher education institutions indicated to the team that newly developed procedures reflect ESG Part 1 and they supported the QA enhancement of PhD studies in practice.

The 2023 SAR, table 3 (p. 16-17) defines a mapping grid that illustrates the compliance of ARACIS' criteria, standards, and performance indicators for newly developed EQA to ESG Part 1. In the mapping grid, reproduced below, the performance indicators (PI) marked by an asterisk do not apply to the Study Domain Authorisation activity as these indicators are referring to learning, teaching and research processes that already took place. The asterisk indicates the only difference between the Study Domain Accreditation and the Study Domain Authorisation procedures.

ESG Part 1	Evaluation of IOSUD[6]			Evaluation of DSD[7]		
	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators
1.1	A.1 C.1	A.1.1 C.1.1	A.1.1.1 A.1.1.2 C.1.1.1 C.1.1.2 C.1.1.3	A.1 C.1	A.1.1 C.1.1	A.1.1.1 A.1.1.2 C.1.1.1 C.1.1.2
1.2	A.1 B.2	A.1.1 B.2.1	A.1.1.1 A.1.1.3 B.2.1.1 B.2.1.2	A.1 B.2	A.1.1 B.2.1	A.1.1.1 B.2.1.1 B.2.1.2 B.2.1.5*

[6] Institutions organising doctoral studies
[7] Doctoral Study Domain (Accreditation and Authorization)

	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators	Criteria	Standards	Performance indicators
1.3	B.2 B.3 B.4	B.2.1 B.3.1 B.4.1	B.2.1.3 B.3.1.1 B.4.1.1	B.2 B.3	B.2.1 B.3.1	B.2.1.3 B.2.1.4* B.3.1.1* B.3.1.2*
1.4	A.1 B.1 B.3 B.4 C.4	A.1.1 B.1.1. B.3.1 B.4.1 C.4.1	A.1.1.1 B.1.1.1 B.1.1.2 B.3.1.1 B.4.1.1 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	A.1 B.1 B.3	A.1.1 B.1.1 B.1.2 B.3.1 B.3.2	A.1.1.1 B.1.1.1* B.1.2.1 B.1.2.2* B.3.1.1* B.3.1.2* B.3.2.1* B.3.2.2*
1.5	A.3 C.3	A.3.1 C.3.1	A.3.1.1 A.3.1.2 C.3.1.1 C.3.1.2 C.3.1.3 C.3.1.4	A.3 C.3	A.3.1 A.3.2 C.3.1	A.3.1.1 A.3.1.2 A.3.1.3 A.3.1.4* A.3.2.1 A.3.2.2 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.2 B.2 C.1 C.2	A.1.2 A.2.1 B.2.1 C.1.1 C.2.2	A.1.2.1 A.1.2.2 A.2.1.1 A.2.1.2 A.2.1.3 B.2.1.3 C.1.1.1 C.2.2.1 C.2.2.2 C.2.2.3	A.1 A.2 B.2 B.3 C.1 C.2	A.1.2 A.1.3 A.2.1 B.2.1 B.3.2 C.1.1 C.2.2	A.1.2.1 A.1.2.2 A.1.3.1* A.1.3.2* A.1.3.3* A.2.1.1 B.2.1.3 B.2.1.4* B.3.2.1* B.3.2.2* C.1.1.1 C.1.1.2 C.2.2.1 C.2.2.2 C.2.2.3

I.7	A.1	A.1.2	A.1.2.1 A.1.2.2	A.1	A.1.2	A.1.2.1 A.1.2.2
	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1
I.8	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1	C.2	C.2.1	C.2.1.1
I.9	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.4	C.1	C.1.1	C.1.1.2

Analysis

General criteria, standards, and performance indicators of Institutional, Bachelor and Master-level evaluations are approved by Government decision. There have been no significant changes to these criteria and standards since the 2018 ENQA evaluation. During the 2023 targeted review, based on the evidence presented of ongoing implementation of these procedures and in the absence of any adverse comment or contrary information from the HEIs or other stakeholders, the expert panel once again confirmed that the criteria and standards remained the same and were aligned with ESG Part 1.

During the site visit, the panel heard from representatives of HEIs that the performance indicators for the evaluation of DSD and IOSUD are designed to better support the enhancement of IQA given that the doctoral level evaluations place less emphasis on having numerous indicators and collecting large amounts of quantitative data. However, the performance indicators for other types of evaluation are overly detailed and place an extra burden on the institutions, while still addressing the effectiveness of IQA.

The compliance of the newly introduced activities has been separately analysed with respect to all parts of ESG Part 1.

1.1 Policy for Quality Assurance

ARACIS procedures consider internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms. Criteria and standards for newly established activities address the existence of relevant IQA in the university. This was confirmed during interviews with representatives of the Agency and higher education institutions (HEIs).
Additionally, the performance indicators for the newly established procedures focus on the continuous development of internal procedures.
The methodology developed for the evaluation of IOSUD and DSD includes 3 to 4 criteria with a range of performance indicators (between 9 and 19) that directly address quality management - there is therefore an explicit focus on IQA, its relevance and its continuous development.

The table below shows the similarity of domains and criteria used for both IOSUD and DSD activities. Two criteria (B4 and C4) do not have their counterparts in the DSD evaluation. The number and sometimes nature of performance indicators may vary from one activity to the other.

	Evaluation of IOSUD	Evaluation of DSD	# of PI - IOSUD	# of PI - DSD
	Criterion A.1. The administrative, managerial institutional structures and the financial resources		5	7

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY (Domain A)	Criterion A.2. Research infrastructure	3	I
	Criterion A.3. Quality of Human Resource	2	6
EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (Domain B)	Criterion B.1. The number, quality, and diversity of candidates enrolled for the admission contest	2	3
	Criterion B.2. The content of doctoral programs	3	5
	Criterion B.3. The results of doctoral studies and procedures for their evaluation	I	4
	Criterion B.4. Quality of doctoral theses	I	
QUALITY MANAGEMENT (Domain C)	Criterion C.1. Existence and periodic implementation of the internal quality assurance system	4	2
	Criterion C.2. Transparency of information and accessibility of learning resources	4	4
	Criterion C.3. Internationalisation	4	3
	Criterion C.4. System for assurance of ethical and academic integrity	7	

Source: templates provided by ARACIS for the external evaluation reports

In "*Structure of the internal evaluation report of a doctoral study domain*" which pertains to both Accreditation of existing study domains, and Authorisation of new domains, and was provided as an Annex 2 to the SAR, ARACIS invites HEIs to give – when writing their internal evaluation report - quite a comprehensive and reflexive analysis of the functioning of their IQA via its key components (objectives, overall structure of IQA, policies, procedures, beneficiaries, responsibilities, participation of various stakeholders in IQA, interaction IQA/management, transparency and access of the information, dimensions of efficiency and impact, use of IQA as a tool for management and improvement of education, and finally, monitoring and improvement of IQA itself). In other words, all the components of a well-developed enhancement-led quality culture. The same goes for the "*Structure of the internal evaluation report of an institution organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD)*"

1.2 Design and Approval of Programmes

The criteria, standards, and performance indicators for all ARACIS procedures are focused on the content of educational programs and learning outcomes. In a previous full evaluation, the expert panel provided recommendations for ARACIS to develop a manual for higher education institutions (HEIs)

to disseminate the concept of learning outcomes. The fulfilment of this recommendation was also assessed during a targeted review.

The National Authority for Qualifications (ANC) and the Ministry of Education are responsible for developing a methodology for identifying, evaluating, and recognizing learning outcomes. ARACIS was invited to participate in this process, and a working group was established within the Agency. A special guideline for designing learning outcomes has been created, with a first draft currently available[8]. In 2022, consultations with representatives from higher education institutions in all university centres were conducted as part of the development process.

Within the Methodology for the Evaluation of Doctoral Studies domains, which applies to both the Authorisation and Accreditation of study domains, the indicator PI.B.2.1.3 addresses learning outcomes. The indicator PI. B.2.1.3 queries that the IOSUD has implemented mechanisms to ensure that the program adequately addresses learning outcomes. This involves specifying the knowledge, skills, responsibility, and autonomy that doctoral students should acquire after completing each discipline or through research activities.

1.3 Student-Centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment

The ARACIS methodologies incorporate multiple standards, discussed below, and performance indicators that prioritise student-centred learning and effective teaching/learning methods. The leadership of ARACIS insisted in its interviews on the strategic importance of developing the learning outcomes approach in Romanian higher education as well as on "what's happening in the classrooms". A more student-centred approach would, according to ARACIS, help develop quality culture within HEIs and facilitate an easy movement of graduates to the labour market.
During the expert interviews, it was noted by student experts that they always pay special attention to student-centred learning during the evaluation process.

Specifically for the new activities related to doctoral studies, standard B.2 emphasises that appropriate teaching/learning and assessment methods should be utilised to enhance doctoral students' research skills and promote ethical behaviour in science.

The standards B.2; C.1 also emphasise the importance of establishing appropriate consultation and feedback systems for doctoral students to assist them in achieving their intended learning outcomes.

1.4 Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Assessment

The criteria for student admission, progression, recognition, and assessment are explicitly defined within the criteria and standards (specifically A.1) for the new activities assessed by this targeted review. Performance indicators A. 1.1.1 for the evaluation of DSD and IOSUD address admission and recognition procedures, as well as the graduation rate of students at the PhD level.

During the interviews, representatives from the National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (CNRED) confirmed that they are involved in the recognition process. Their recognition process has been simplified and integrated into the admission process, allowing students to apply for recognition online.

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

1.5 Teaching Staff

The criteria and standards serve to establish performance indicators for the recruitment of qualified teaching staff and outline their obligations to implement student-centred learning methodologies and modern teaching-learning techniques.

In the context of the newly established evaluation criteria for DSD and IOSUD the whole A.3 applies to the quality of human resources. In the standard A.3.1 for DSD and IOSUD the presence of qualified PhD student supervisors is defined as a key requirement. Additionally, it's specified that doctoral supervisors within the domain must engage in scientific activities that demonstrate international visibility.

1.6 Learning Resources and Student Support

ARACIS external evaluation procedures incorporate specific criteria that are designed to assess material resources and student support services. In the context of evaluating PhD studies, the criteria require the presence of modern research infrastructure and access to resources that are necessary for conducting doctoral-level research. Additionally, the criteria emphasise the importance of providing specialised support services to enhance the research skills of doctoral students and to promote ethical behaviour in scientific research.

1.7 Information Management

One of the criteria established by ARACIS for external evaluation is the requirement for higher education institutions to maintain a regularly updated database on internal quality assurance. For the evaluation of doctoral study domains/institutions, the collection of special indicators/data is emphasised to facilitate monitoring of internal quality assurance.

1.8 Public Information

An evaluation criteria of ARACIS external evaluation procedures addresses the requirement for higher education institutions to ensure transparency of information relating to study programs, certificates, diplomas, and qualifications offered. In the case of IOSUD, it is important to ensure that information of interest to doctoral students, future candidates, and the general public is published on the website in accordance with the general regulations on data protection.

1.9 On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes

ARACIS evaluation criteria mandate the presence of internal quality assurance mechanisms, which must include the periodic review of programmes, for higher education institutions. Specifically for the new activities related to doctoral studies, the criteria C.1 refers to periodic implementation of internal QA procedures. Furthermore, the representatives responsible for quality assurance in HEIs told the panel that HEIs have established internal procedures for periodically monitoring study programmes to ensure that they remain up to date with the latest developments in their respective fields.

1.10 Cyclical External Quality Assurance

ARACIS evaluates all HEIs and programmes/domains every five years. Renewal of accreditation is obligatory. In the last 15 years, all HEIs have passed three cycles of external evaluation, both at institutional and programme level. For IOSUD and DSD it was the first cycle of evaluation.

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.

The effectiveness of internal QA is addressed in all criteria, standards and performance indicators of ARACIS. The newly established criteria, standards and performance indicators for evaluating IOSUD and DSD, as well as the conducted evaluation process itself, were perceived as enhancement-oriented by the representatives of HEIs. However, the panel notes that while the performance indicators of Institutional, Bachelor and Master-level evaluations do address ESG part 1, having somewhat fewer indicators may allow for more flexibility and enhancement-orientation in the process and may be pertinent to consider in the future iterations of the process.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel encourages ARACIS to review the performance indicators of Institutional, Bachelor and Master-level evaluations and reduce the number of them, with a particular emphasis on technical indicators, to facilitate the shift from a compliance-based approach to a more supportive one.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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.

Evidence

According to the SAR (p. 6), the evaluation of doctoral studies was originally mandated by the Law on National Education in 2011. However, it took a while to design the methodology (see p. 12 of this ERR) and in 2021, the Constitutional Court of Romania finally mandated ARACIS, or another EQAR registered agency as allowed by law, to complete the evaluations by the end of the 2021. This mandate accelerated the last legal steps as the last amendments to the law in the field of doctoral studies were approved on March 31st 2021and on April 12th, 2021, the Minister of Education approved the Methodology and the related criteria, standards and performance indicators.

The evaluation of doctoral studies comprises three different procedures;

- the periodic external evaluation of the organisational framework, named "the institution organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD)"

- the periodic external evaluation of the doctoral study domains (DSD) in which the doctoral study programmes are organised.
- the evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain.

The development of the guides for these new procedures (alongside with a more comprehensive reflexion on the whole external quality assurance model for Romania) was based on earlier discussions and consultations of several stakeholders and the SAR describes the process as co-creation (p.21) : A working-group with representatives of the Ministry of Education, the CNR, HEIs consortia, students and teachers unions was set. Intermediate versions were made public (ARACIS website) and discussed in several CNR meetings. All HEIs were invited to send comments.

In the various interviews with HEI representatives who had participated in consultations for devising evaluation methodologies, the CNR, the National Authority for qualifications, as well as students, the panel asked the participants how they contributed to the co-construction of the new activities and their answers confirmed the process described in the SAR.

Analysis

As already described in the introductory paragraphs of this report and briefly summarised here above, the design of the new methodologies to be applied to the third cycle (IOSUD, DSD and study domain authorisation) has been a long and intense process. From the earlier legal provision (2011) to effective implementation (2021-2022), over a decade occurred with a background of political instability (several ministers of HE took office and resigned) and this gave room and time for ARACIS to reflect on what was needed, in the very context of Romania. It is worth noting that some earlier proposals by certain HE ministers were considered somehow unfit for purpose and not applied, as the panel heard in one of its interviews.

In SAR p. 19, the development of the performance indicators 35 (for DSD) / 20 (for authorization) and 36 (for IOSUD) is said to be based on *"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"* and page 21, the SAR explains that the WG set up to co-create the methodologies *focused primarily on the indicators and value attached to them.* This, along with the other evidence supports the panels' understanding that stakeholders are indeed involved the designing methodologies fit for purpose.

The representatives of the Romanian government met by the panel emphasised that the implementation of the evaluation of the doctoral studies had been important for building trust in the higher education system, including the higher education institutions and ARACIS itself. The Romanian higher education system has in the past been hampered by scandals related to research integrity; which now foregrounds the need for ethics, integrity and transparency in the system.

In several meetings, the panel heard convergent views from the stakeholders regarding the relevance of the approach adopted to doctoral studies. All this leads the panel to consider that in the Romanian context, the so-called IOSUD and DSD methodologies are considered an appropriate set of methods; and thus ARACIS satisfies the standard.

Panel commendation

The panel commends ARACIS for the swift way it reacted – in dialogue with its stakeholders - in designing and fine-tuning the new methodologies following the mandate by the Constitutional Court of Romania.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

With the purpose of reinforcing the ownership and responsibility of quality assurance by the universities and, by so doing, deepening the culture of quality within the universities, the panel suggests to even further streamline the set of indicators used in the 3rd cycle EQA.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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

Evidence

The three evaluation guides produced by ARACIS in 2021 and 2022 for the new EQA activities were published on its website[9]. They provided both the HEIs and experts with the complete information needed for implementation.

As stated in the SAR pp. 24-25 and checked by the panel members, the guides extensively describe the different steps of these evaluations which include a self-assessment, a site visit for the external assessment, a resulting report as well as a consistent follow-up. The steps are:

- A self-assessment process concluded with an internal evaluation report (developed according the structure provided in the Guide) an uploaded in the ARACIS own Cloud;
- The analysis of the SER by the experts panel and request of clarifications/additional information, if needed;
- A 2-4 day evaluation site-visit that includes visits to the education/research premises and facilities and interviews with representatives of students, academic staff, management structures in charge with internal quality assurance, ethics commission, graduates, employers and other stakeholders;
- The drafting of the external evaluation report by the panel, including the findings and recommendations for enhancement;
- The sending of the EER to the education provider for comments and factual errors;
- The sending of the final version of the EER (including the comments received) to the Permanent Specialty Experts' Commission (PSEC) in case of DSD and to the ARACIS' department of External Quality Evaluation in case of IOSUD that both issue a proposal resolution;

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[9] Guide_IOSUD.pdf (aracis.ro)
Guide_EDS_domains.pdf (aracis.ro))
Guide-on-conducting-the-process-for-setting-up-of-a-new-doctoral-study-domain.pdf (aracis.ro)

- The sending of a proposed resolution to the ARACIS Council for analysis and decision;
- The communication of the decision to the evaluated institution and to the Ministry of Education and publication on the ARACIS website
- Follow-up activities for all evaluations but differentiated (one or three years after the procedure) according to the outcomes of each evaluation.

The processes were discussed with the HEIS in meetings organised by ARACIS.

Recruiting and training experts was done rapidly as well (see next ESG).

The panel learned both from ARACIS representatives and the experts that the preparation and implementation of these procedures happened during the pandemic which meant that the evaluations were organised in hybrid format. The use of a digital platform and international experts was also included in the experience.

The government financially supported the HEIs in order to achieve this urgent task.

Analysis

According to the evidence presented, the panel confirms that the activities are aligned with the standard. The interviewees (HEIs representatives and experts) confirmed that the activities of the process were pre-defined, implemented consistently and published.

In the SAR (p. 25-26), ARACIS expresses its satisfaction at having been able to "finalise in less than a year almost 450 evaluations for doctoral studies". To enable this fast implementation IOSUD and DSD activities were made in tandem. And, indeed, the panel heard from *all* participants a high level of satisfaction about the manner in which this mandate was quickly and efficiently implemented. Many stakeholders, such as members of ARACIS's collective bodies and HEI representatives, as well as the Minister for Education, told the panel of the important role of ARACIS in building trust in the higher education system, including in the doctoral system.

The agency also mentioned some organisational difficulties (such as respecting deadlines, monitoring of some meetings, coping with some redundancies in the EQA activities) but already provided ideas for further development. For instance, at an operational level, work for an extended implementation of the use of the digital platform; or, at a methodological level, organise the evaluation of IOSUD within the institutional review activity, leading to some desirable simplification. The panel heard from the senior management team of the agency that the availability of the effective hybrid participation forms enabled the smooth online participation of the international experts in the IOSUD evaluations; and had that option not been available, the use of international experts might not have been possible given the timeline of the implementation of the evaluations.

The panel noted that while there had been various external constraints that led ARACIS and the HEIs to implement the 3rd cycle evaluation activities in an intensive manner and during a very short period; the process itself had been very productive. The general satisfaction of the stakeholders is one indicator of that. The speed of the process also allowed the agency to get a comprehensive snapshot of the situation over a condensed period of time instead of stretching the evaluations over a cycle of several years, during which the operational environment of the HEIs might have changed significantly. Another indication of success, according to the panel, is the fact that the inevitable difficulties that occurred already produced corrective actions and reflections. This implementation acted as a sort of pilot phase that produced a list of agreed lessons learnt. ARACIS, in regular dialogue with its

stakeholders, appears as a mature and reflexive agency. The panel is thus able to conclude that ARACIS complies with the standard.

Panel commendation

The panel commends ARACIS for the fast and professional implementation of the new methodologies (almost 450 evaluations in less than a year), following the mandate from the Constitutional Court of Romania.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

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

Evidence

The SAR provides comprehensive information on how reviewers for the 3rd-cycle evaluations were recruited, selected and trained and how panels were composed.

According to the SAR (p. 26), the composition of the experts' panels is as follows:

IOSUD	DSD (including the accreditation of study domains and the authorisation of new study domains)
§ one member of the ARACIS Council (with the role of methodological coordination);	§ one or two expert evaluators (academic staff and doctoral advisor in the same DSD as the one undergoing evaluation, member of the RNE);
§ one expert evaluator (academic staff and doctoral advisor, member of the National Register of Evaluators - RNE), acting as coordinator of the evaluation process;	§ one international expert (member of the International Register of Evaluators);
§ one doctoral student (member of the National Register of Evaluators for Students);	§ 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).	

In selecting all their reviewers, ARACIS uses the National Register of Evaluators (RNE) that includes potential reviewers (including international ones) after open calls and according to criteria and procedures (selection and appointment processes, and mechanism of no conflict of interest) that are made public[10]. For the sake of example, the following criteria are applied in selecting international evaluators[11]:

a) experience in external quality assurance in education;
b) international experience in external quality assurance in higher education;
c) experience in university management;
d) recognised professional activity in their respective scientific field.

The External Quality Evaluation Department of ARACIS (for external evaluation of IOSUD) or Accreditation Department (for external evaluation of DSD and authorization of new study domains) appoints the expert panel members based on proposals of the Permanent Specialty Experts' Commission (PSEC).

The SAR gives information (page 27) on how the experts were provided in advance with the needed information (including information about the HE system in Romania and its legal framework) and training sessions were organised: both separate and joint sessions were offered online. Along the process, the panels were assisted by a member of ARACIS staff or an expert evaluator from the pool.

The ARACIS document Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct[12] sets out the rules on ethical and professional conduct and proposes the principles which must be observed by all persons involved in the ARACIS activities.

Analysis

The interviews with the evaluated HEIs, with ARACIS staff and with reviewers (among them two international experts online) gave the panel the possibility to verify that information.

In these new procedures to evaluate the 3rd cycle, it is a legal requirement that student experts and international experts be systematically included in panels. *Looking at research means looking at international research*, was a frequent statement heard in the interviews.

Besides, ARACIS explained to the ENQA panel that international experts also take part in institutional evaluations (even if it is not a legal requirement) as this idea was also backed by the National Council

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[10] *Procedura UTI.PUB.05 (aracis.ro)*
[11] *http://www.aracis.ro/en/national-register-of-evaluators/*
[12] https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Code_of_ethics_and_rules_of_conduct_ARACIS_2017.pdf

of Rectors. This latter finds the institutions can benefit from their expertise and therefore gain added value from their contributions in the reviews.

A common issue raised by the presence of international experts in panels is how agencies provide them with sufficient knowledge of the higher education system where the review takes place. The SAR pointed some lack of an in-depth understanding of the Romanian system (p.28), a fact that was *not* confirmed in the interviews during the site-visit. The international experts who attended the interview said they were given all the needed information *("quality and quantity of information was sufficient")* and that they could rely on the ARACIS coordinator or colleagues in the panel to obtain answers to their questions. The international experts pointed out that effective simultaneous interpretation was always available for them to participate in English.

The ENQA panel noted that international experts were given additional autonomy in being free to organise separateonline interviews during the site visit organised in a hybrid mode and in being asked to provide their own independent written report (see also ESG 2.6.), which is presented as part of the main report While the international experts were able to organise additional separate online interviews, they were always included in the meetings organised for the whole team, as well as in the internal meetings of the evaluation teams.

All experts declared in the interviews that their training had been efficient to grasp the various aspects of the new methodology and that they had felt well-prepared for their tasks. The panel did not hear objections from other stakeholders on this very precise point.

Regarding the possible conflicts of interests, the panel raised the question to the representatives of HEIs and to the experts who declared that they hadn't faced the concern in any of the processes. Some declared that the policies to avoid conflicts of interests were clear and transparent, also giving some examples of the rules. Based on this evidence, the panel is able to confirm that ARACIS is compliant with the standard.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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.

2018 review recommendation

EQAR register committee stated the following in response to a substantive change report 15.12.2021

During the upcoming external review of ARACIS renewal of registration, the Register Committee expects that the following issues to be specifically analysed by the review panel.

ii. How the agency ensures consistent decision making given the different approaches in the external QA of doctoral studies i.e. the periodic external evaluation of institutions organizing doctoral study programmes (IOSUD) and the periodic external evaluation of doctoral study domains (DSD).

Evidence

The published "Guides for IOSUD and DSD" give explicit information on the criteria, standards and performance indicators to be used in both EQA activities. The guides describe in detail each step or stage of the evaluation processes. They also describe how decisions have to be made.

For instance, some excerpts from the Guide for IOSUD (accreditation and renewal of accreditation):

[…] After the site visit (step 5), *the Experts' Panel will draw up and submit to ARACIS an External Evaluation Report, in Romanian, as per Annex No. 3 of this Guide, containing the findings made following the evaluation process on the fulfilment of the system of criteria, standards and performance indicators set out in Annex No. 4 of the Guide, as well as recommendations for enhancing future activity of the respective IOSUD.*

In step 7, the external evaluation report is submitted to the IOSUD. *The evaluated institution should formulate and communicate to ARACIS its point of view/reply on the external evaluation report, which may include observations on any material errors.*

Step 8: Analyzing the Experts Panel's reports within ARACIS' Department of External Quality Evaluation
The Director of mission sends to the Experts' panel the point of view/reply on the external evaluation report received from the evaluated institution. The Experts' Panel draws up its final report, integrating, if this is the case, the observations it has received, and formulating proposals regarding fulfilment or failure to fulfil the quality standards. The Director of mission forwards the final form of the external evaluation report to the Department of External Quality Evaluation. The department analyses the report and proposes a decision to the ARACIS Council on maintaining/withdrawing accreditation for the evaluated IOSUD, which should be stipulated in a Minutes document signed by all its members.

Step 9: *The ARACIS Council analyzes the proposal for decision received from the Department of External Quality Evaluation and takes a final decision on maintaining accreditation/withdrawal of accreditation, as appropriate, for the IOSUD under review. The decision to withdraw the accreditation shall be taken in the event of a finding that quality standards have not been met. The ARACIS Council's decision shall be communicated to the evaluated institution and published on the Agency's website within 5 working days of its adoption*

At this stage, procedures of complaints and/or appeals may occur (see ESG 2.7) before the agency communicates its decision to the Ministry of Education.

The Guide for DSD provides the same pattern of steps.

In the annexes providing templates for the external evaluation reports, we read that the performance indicators must be graded either 'fulfilled' or 'partially fulfilled' or 'not fulfilled'. Explicative instructions are given throughout the templates.

The experts and staff members concerned with these mechanisms told the panel they had not met situations in which the team would not reach a consensus on the judgements. The panel interviewed experts as well as ARACIS staff, who explained that the panels were able to reach agreement on the

findings and recommendations thanks to the online meetings that were organised and allowed them to discuss in-depth.

The panel interviews with the internal bodies of ARACIS, with the experts and the representatives of the evaluated HEIs, permitted the panel to confirm the effective implementation of these mechanisms.

Analysis

The panel checked the methods used by the agency to ensure consistency in the outcomes or judgments resulting from the 3rd cycle evaluation procedures.

It is the agency's responsibility to publish its criteria and provide guidance to the institutions and to the experts engaged in the evaluating processes.

The same requirements apply for the other two activities as stated in the guides.

Based on the evidence presented, the ENQA panel is convinced that there are sufficient mechanisms and steps to prevent inconsistency.

As already explained under ESG 2.2., designing the methodology and its content was the result of rounds of consultations and discussions, which already worked as a process to raise awareness and build understanding from the side of the HEIs. In addition, the agency provided them with workshops prior to the evaluations and guides with templates.

Training properly the panel members for their expertise (in particular to appreciate whether the PI were fulfilled, partially fulfilled or unfulfilled), providing them with templates and assuring they would be accompanied by a methodological coordinator; all this completes a phase that could be named "preparatory phase".

In addition, the panel took into consideration the fact that, once the visit completed, other mechanisms take place. These include for example that the evaluated HEI may formulate a reply on the draft EER, and these observations or suggested corrections are taken into account in formulating a "consolidated report". This consolidated report is then scrutinised by the ARACIS Department of External Quality Evaluation for IOSUD evaluations; and by PSEC in the case of DSD evaluations. This step (e.g. #8 in the guide for IOSUD) confirms the validity of the report and provides the Council of ARACIS with a evidence-based proposition of decision; the Council of ARACIS makes its decision). These mechanisms proved to be sufficient to ensure consistency.

Interviews with relevant stakeholders, such as ARACIS staff members as well as external experts lead the panel to make the conclusion that the review panels are able to effectively use the criteria for making their decisions and reach decisions. Furthermore; it seems that during the COVID crisis it was rather easy to set online meetings with the panel to discuss the draft reports at length. The panel interviews with the internal bodies of ARACIS, with the experts and the representatives of the evaluated HEIs, permitted the panel to confirm the effective implementation of these mechanisms.

The panel also queried the relevance and number of performance indicators in the interviews with HEIs. Even if the so-called list of critical indicators meant an effort towards concision, there seems to be a shared view between ARACIS as well as HEIs and experts on the need to reduce still further the number of performance indicators – which by the way would lead to less pages to produce (by the HEIs) and be read (by the evaluators) - and to work even more on their relevance. In an attempt to reach extended ownership of IQA, the World Bank report even suggested including in the evaluation

processes a selection of indicators by the institution itself. There is hope, the panel heard, that in the process of implementing the New Law, a shift from quantitative to qualitative indicators (*they promote and support institutional diversity* – WB report, p15) will happen. *'Both ARACIS and the university are ready for change'.*

The doctoral accreditation processes lead to high stakes decisions for the institutions. There is some evidence that this can lead them to take a cautious, defensive, approach to the exercise to the detriment of focussing on opportunities for enhancement. Now that the initial threshold requirements have been satisfied at the level of individual institutions and study domains and in relation to confidence in the overall national system, through the 2021 IOSUD/DSD processes, it may be opportune to revisit the indicators and procedures.

Panel recommendation

Although the doctoral EQA processes use fewer indicators than processes for the first and second cycle, we recommend that the agency continue to review their fitness for purpose, particularly with a view to focussing on how the indicators contribute to the enhancement of study programmes.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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.

Evidence

The Guide on conducting the process of External Evaluation of institution organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD, p. 8) and pertaining to both accreditation and renewal of accreditation, explains that "*The External Evaluation Report of the IOSUD, as well as the report of the international expert, shall be published on the ARACIS website once the ARACIS Council has adopted the final decision (and following the resolution of the appeals, if applicable), except for the Experts' Panel members' proposals for decisions*". The same requirements apply for the other two activities as stated in the guides.

The SAR (p. 30) indicates that "t*he 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.*"

The SAR adds that the external reports are indeed elaborated by the team coordinator in Romanian and "*with the findings and judgments of all members of the experts' panel. The findings of the international expert are integrated into the panel report.*" The panel was able to confirm during the site visit that in those evaluation where an international expert is part of the evaluation panel, they are asked to provide an additional independent report, which is then published alongside the full report which is written in Romanian and must already integrate the views of also the international expert. While the full report is published in Romanian, the international evaluators met by the panel confirmed that the rich discussions within the panel enabled the panel to arrive at a shared, consistent view on the conclusions of the evaluation.

ARACIS Council takes the final decision based on the panel findings and the consolidated report of the PSEC or the Department of External Quality Evaluation; as per the ARACIS SAR (p.29).

The template provided by ARACIS contains 7 parts: after the introduction and the methods used (brief information about the institutional context and the process of the evaluation), the 3rd part (and more important in size) is the analysis of the performance indicators. Next comes a SWOT analysis, an overview of judgments and recommendations for each indicator and finally, some conclusions and general recommendations. The report is then completed with annexes. The panel was able to study a number of reports published on the website and accessed directly through the links provided by ARACIS.

The SAR (p. 30) points to the fact that some reports could be improved in terms of relevance of information included, analysis of the findings and the way in which recommendations are formulated.

Analysis

At the time of the visit, the panel found the ARACIS website somewhat challenging to navigate and to identify the full reports. There is no doubt that reports are published somewhere on the website as they come along (as annexes) with the presentation of the review's decisions made by the Council of ARACIS. The international expert is required to write their own report in English (for the sake of the language issue and for the sake of independence). However, for this targeted review the panel was able to access them directly through the links provided by ARACIS, thus ascertaining that they are published. ESG 2.6. is met, but an improvement of the accessibility of reports on the website is highly desirable.

The panel also investigated whether the ARACIS reports are clear to the general academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals. While some are clear and understandable, the panel also noted that in some of the sample of reports (in English) provided by ARACIS, there were examples of reports that were somewhat less pleasant to read. In particular, the central part of the reports (section 3 - analysis of the performance indicators) appears to be merely a check list of "fulfilled/partially fulfilled or not fulfilled" results occasionally lacking depth of analysis and evidence-based material.

Panel recommendation

The panel recommends ARACIS to facilitate the accessibility of the reports on its website.

The panel recommends that ARACIS train experts on report drafting to allow the experts to produce clear, evidence-based and analytical reports that provide value-added to the community.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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.

2018 review recommendation

The ENQA review panel stated the following:

ARACIS should take steps to make its appeals and complaints procedure more widely known.

The EQAR Register Committee stated the following:

While the Register Committee welcomed the clarification on the appeals process and the publication of 'ARACIS Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions', the Committee noted that the members nominated to act in the Appeals Committee are not published and that the revised procedure is not easily accessible on the website. The Committee therefore underlined that more steps are needed to ensure full transparency in the agency's handling of appeals. It therefore could not follow the review panel's conclusion of compliance and concluded that ARACIS, complies only partially with ESG 2.7.

Evidence

According to the ARACIS SAR, between the previous ENQA review in 2018 and October 2022; ARACIS had two separate documents outlining the procedures for appeals and complaints; "Settlement of appeals submitted by higher education institutions" and "Settlement of complaints". The former pertained to appeals against the outcomes of external evaluation activities. The latter pertained to cases of conflicts of interest or breach of the provisions of the Code of Ethics or other aspects of ARACIS activities that are not related to a specific evaluation procedure. Both procedures were available on the ARACIS website until October 2022, when a new guideline was produced that pertains to both appeals and complaints; and which replaced the old guidelines on the website.

In October 2022, ARACIS updated its Appeals and Complaints procedure to comprise a single document with simplified process for both types of activities. The new document is titled "Procedure for solving appeals and complaints submitted in external quality evaluation processes" and published in ARACIS website[13]. The document contains description of procedures, timelines, and organisational bodies related to the procedure of solving appeals and complaints. Another important document in terms of appeals and complaints is the Code of ethics and rules of conduct; similarly found on ARACIS website[14].

The evaluated HEI can submit an appeal against the results of the external quality evaluation on the grounds that the evaluation was not objectively conducted, was not based on clear evidence or that the criteria set by the evaluation methodology and/or the evaluation procedures were not correctly applied. The guideline outlines the membership of the Permanent Appeals Commission, which ARACIS appointed in November 2022 for a four year mandate, to solve the submitted appeals. The Permanent Appeals Commission comprises two academics and one student, with additional deputy members comprising one academic and one student. The members and deputy members are all members of the National Register of Evaluators. The composition of the commission is published on ARACIS website[15]. For appeals concerning evaluations of study domains or programmes, two additional *ad hoc* members are appointed to ensure that there is sufficient disciplinary knowledge for the Permanent Appeals Commission to make their decision. All reports resulting from the appeals review are communicated to the HEI that submitted the appeals and are also published on ARACIS website.

[13] Procedure: appeals and complaints - ARACIS
[14] ARACIS-Code-of-ethics-and-rules-of-conduct_2017.pdf
[15] Microsoft Word - Po-solutionarea contestatiilor-var finala (aracis.ro)

Complaints can be submitted by HEIs, education providers or other legal entities interested in providing education, as well as by students and teachers, other individuals or stakeholders. Complaints can be submitted in situations of conflicts of interest concerning the members of the evaluation panels; or in cases of violations of the provisions of the Code of Ethics and norms of conduct which concerns how the evaluation panel members 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 and Rules of Conduct. The complaints that relate to conflicts of interests concerning the members of the evaluation panels are solved by the Executive Board of the ARACIS Council. Complaints concerning violations of the ARACIS Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct in quality assurance activities are solved by the ARACIS Ethics Commission, whose composition and tasks are outlined in the Code of Ethics document. The Ethics Commission comprises the chair and four members. The Chair and three members are selected amongst the members of the ARACIS Council; of these one represents the students and the other one the academic trade unions. The final member is selected amongst the ARACIS permanent staff.

According to the SAR, very few external quality assurance decisions are appealed and there have been no appeals or complaints so far relating to the new procedure under consideration.

While all the relevant documentation can be found on ARACIS website; the ARACIS SAR states that the agency has additionally disseminated the revised procedure for appeals and complaints through all relevant communication channels, such as the ARACIS Facebook page and newsletter. Also, as mentioned in the SAR (p. 34) ARACIS presented the revised procedure to the representative of higher education institutions responsible for quality assurance in a special online information session online.

Analysis

While there have been no complaints or appeals between October 2022 when the new Appeals and Complaints procedure was adopted and the time of the site visit, the panel was provided with examples of reports resulting from appeals and complaints under the old procedures. These included an appeal that resulted in a decision in favour of the appealing higher education institution; an appeal where the result was not changed, and an appeal where the higher education institution decided to withdraw the appeal as a result of an amicable mediatory process. The panel similarly interviewed the said higher education institution that had submitted an appeal and later withdrew it; and was told that the process had been amicable and constructive.

Studying the documentation provided and based on the interviews with ARACIS staff; current members of the Permanent Appeals commission, as well as a member of an old *ad hoc* Appeals Commission; the panel was able to ascertain that the complaints and appeals are dealt with through the same procedure, regardless of the type of quality assurance activity they pertain to. This holds true also to the new activities related to evaluation of doctoral education.

The evaluation panel was told in the interviews that while higher education institutions are sometimes hesitant to lodge a formal appeal or complaint and prefer to express their concerns in a more informal manner over phone or email; ARACIS also tries to encourage higher education institutions to express their potential concerns in the form of a formal appeal and complaint, thus increasing the transparency of the entire appeals and complaints procedure. The panel studied the revised procedure and is convinced that it describes in a clear manner the types of problems that give cause for an appeal, and the types of problems that give cause for a complaint; as well as the steps, deadlines and responsible bodies and persons related to the appeals and complaints processes.

The panel has ascertained that the guidelines, as well as the reports pertaining to resolved appeals and complaints cases can be found on ARACIS website. Furthermore, the team has ascertained that ARACIS has appointed the Permanent Appeals Commission for a four-year term and published the composition of the commission. ARACIS has also disseminated information regarding appeals and complaints commission through various means. Thus, ARACIS has responded to the recommendation given by the previous review on standard 2.7.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ENHANCEMENT AREA

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

ARACIS operates within a national system and culture of public administration that is characterised by a high level of specification. This calls for strategic engagement on the part of the agency with policy making authorities to ensure that the detailed primary and secondary legislation generates the conditions that allow it to develop fit for purpose methodologies of external quality assurance. In a democracy it is of course the prerogative of the government and parliament to set public policy through legislation. It is also appropriate that **professional experts advise policy decision makers** in a timely manner on international good practice and local systemic requirements and experience to inform this policy making. We have noted that the agency has been successful in influencing the development of the law within Romania. An example of this is the regulations that were (eventually) applied to the doctoral studies accreditation process.

Alongside its technical expertise, another of the reasons the agency is able to have influence is because of its **strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement**. This engagement applies particularly to the Ministry of Education and the universities themselves. In some ways it appears that ARACIS is able to broker the relationship between the two as far as it concerns external quality assurance. It also has formal relations with other stakeholders, particularly students, who are represented in the Council and activities of the agency. These strong relationships also embrace stakeholders who are outside the immediate field of higher education staff such as pre-university education, employers, and public agencies such as ANC, the qualifications authority. The action plan produced under the ESQA project testifies to the systematic approach the agency has given to stakeholder engagement and which will need to continue.

The demands of external quality assurance in Romania, as in other mature national systems, are changing. The internal quality assurance organs of the universities have increased their capacity and effectiveness over recent years. This affords an opportunity for a reduction in the volume and intensity of external quality assurance. This is desirable, not simply from the point of view of efficiency, to reduce the scale of transactions conducted by ARACIS, but more importantly to **reinforce the ownership and responsibility of quality assurance by the universities**. Only by so doing, can the culture of quality deepen within the universities.

The recent experience of evaluating doctoral institutions and domains gives some pointers for the development of methodologies fit for purpose in the future. A notable feature is the **streamlined set of indicators** used in this process. The use of a digital platform and international experts are other elements that can be replicated. ARACIS already has significant resources to draw to inform the future developments. The QAFIN project and the joint ANC project on learning outcomes are fine examples of the conceptual work that has been done to date.

It appears likely from the draft framework law that has been published by the minister that the use of institutional accreditation will continue to be accompanied by either programme accreditation (at levels 5 and 6) or domain accreditation (at levels 7 and 8). The criteria are sat down in the primary legislation but the detailed indicators remain to be developed in secondary legislation. This is where the opportunity arises to change the focus of these indicators. Fewer indicators are required than in

the past as multiplication of indicators can foster a superficial, "box-ticking' approach. The indicators should focus on the relevant outcomes rather than on the input factors.

New kinds of programs offer **opportunities for additional experimentation** and development of methodologies. For example, micro-   credentials are an important development across international higher education scene at present and it is planned to introduce these in Romania. There seems to be an international consensus that replicating programme accreditation style processes for the quality assurance of **micro-credentials** is not efficient or necessary. Micro-   credentials could potentially be accredited on a subject area or domain basis. This would leave detailed program design in the hands of competent and approved universities. However implemented, it is essential that micro-credential quality assurance involves employers and other representatives from the world of work.

Another area of experimentation across the international scene relates to the **quality assurance of European Universities.** Romanian universities have been active in joining such consortia. It is a characteristic of these consortia that special arrangements need to be put in place for the quality assurance of joint programs and indeed of the overall collaboration. The Romanian legislation already acknowledges this development; and the Romanian universities have the opportunity to accredit joint Programmes. ARACIS is able to develop flexible methodology in accordance with the European approach to the accreditation of joint programs. This can serve as a model for the development of quality assurance methods that could later be applied to domestic programs.

Short cycle degrees at level five are a novelty in the Romanian higher education system and could also serve as a test bed for a more dynamic and streamlined approach to accreditation. Similar to micro-credentials, short cycle degrees typically have a close relationship to the world of work and so quality assurance arrangements should have employer participation.

Existing quality assurance procedures take the single campus, in-person programme normative. Each location of delivery requires a separate accreditation. **Online programmes** are required to have an in-person version and to be separately accredited. Consideration should be given to reducing the redundancy of these provisions. Universities operating branch/outreach campuses could be required to demonstrate their approach to sharing programmes across campuses without separate external accreditation. Conversely online programmes do not need to be modelled on an in-person analogue. It may be more consistent to develop an online programme concept and pedagogy *de novo*, "born digital" and accredited as such.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

MINISTRY ROLES IN VERIFICATION OF DEGREES

The role of the ministry in certifying doctoral dissertations is peculiar to the Romanian system. This function is not integrated into the quality assurance system. This is apparently contrary to the autonomy of the university to organise and certify studies.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 2.2

The panel commends ARACIS for the swift way it reacted – in dialog with its stakeholders - in designing and fine-tuning the new methodologies following the mandate by the Constitutional Court of Romania.

ESG 2.3

The panel commends ARACIS for the fast and professional implementation of the new methodologies (almost 450 evaluations in less than a year), following the mandate from the Constitutional Court of Romania.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ESG 2.5

Although the doctoral EQA processes use fewer indicators than processes for the first and second cycle, the panel recommend that the agency continue to review their fitness, particularly with a view to focussing on how the indicators contribute to the enhancement of study programmes.

ESG 2.6

The panel recommends ARACIS to facilitate the accessibility of the reports on its website.

The panel recommends that ARACIS train experts on report drafting to allow the experts to produce clear, evidence-based and analytical reports that provide value-added to the community.

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, ARACIS is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 2.1

The panel encourages ARACIS to review the performance indicators of Institutional, Bachelor and Master-level evaluations and reduce the number of them, with a particular emphasis on technical indicators, to facilitate the shift from a compliance-based approach to a more supportive one.

ESG 2.2

With the purpose of reinforcing the ownership and responsibility of quality assurance by the universities and, by so doing, deepening the culture of quality within the universities, the panel suggests to even further streamline the set of indicators used in the 3rd cycle EQA.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Programme of the site visit

This ESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
		[15.3.2023] – Day 1		
1	**9:30 – 10:30** 60 min	Meeting with Government representatives	*Minister of Education* *Secretary of state* *Minister's Councillor*	
	11:00 30 min	Review panel's private meeting		
2	**11:30** 45 min	Meeting with the CEO and the Chair of the Board (or equivalent)	*ARACIS Council President* *ARACIS Council Vice-President* *General Director*	

	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	60 min	Lunch (panel only)		
3	**13.30** 45 min	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team	*ARACIS Council President Counsellor* *Director, Quality Assurance Department* *Head of Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office* *Auditor, Public Audit Compartment*	
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		

| 4 | 14.30

45 min | Meeting with the agency staff/representatives on the agency's self-selected enhancement area and stakeholders involved in the consultations | ARACIS Council

Director of the ARACIS Council Quality External Evaluation Department

Director of the ARACIS Council Accreditation Department (also Chair of SAR team)

Secretary General of ARACIS Council

Staff

General Director

HEI representatives participating in consultations

Head of Council for Doctoral Studies, University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest

Vice-Rector, University from Pitești

Vice-Rector, "Gheorghe Dima" National Music Academy | |
| | 15 min | Review panel's private discussion | | |

5	**15:30** 45 min	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of external QA activities	*Director, Quality Assurance Department* *Head of Programme Accreditation and Evaluation Service* *Head of Institutional Accreditation and Evaluation Service* *Head of Evaluation of Doctoral Studies Office* *Head of Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office*	
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		

| 6 | **16:30**

45 min | Meeting with department/key body of the agency 1 | ARACIS Council

Representative of the *University „Babeș-Bolyai" from Cluj-Napoca*

Representative of the University of Agriculture Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca

Ethics Commission

President and member to ARACIS Council

Member and student member of ARACIS Council

Permanent Appeals Commission

Representative of the „Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Representative of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy „Gr.T.Popa" of Iași

Members of previous appeal committees

Expert, member in an appeal committee | |
| | 15 min | Review panel's private discussion | | |

7	60 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2		
		Dinner (panel only)		
		[16.3.2023] – Day 2		
	60 min	Review panel's private meeting		

| 8 | **10:00**

45 min | Meeting with department/key body of the agency 2 | <u>Representatives of ARACIS Permanent Speciality Commissions (PSEC)</u>(

President, C4: Social, Political and Communication Sciences

President, C5: Administrative Sciences, Education Sciences and Psychology

President, C10: Engineering Sciences I

Secretary, C13: Distance and part-time education

Member, C10: Engineering Sciences I

Student, member of C3: Legal Sciences

Student, member of C13: Distance learning and part-time learning education | |
| | 15 min | Review panel's private discussion | | |

| 9 | **11:00**

45 min | Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/ HEI representatives | *Rector, University "1 December" Alba Iulia (Public)*

Rector, National Music University from Bucharest (Public)

Rector, University Politehnica of Timișoara (Public)

Vice-Rector, University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Carol Davila" Bucharest (Public)

Rector, "Nicolae Balcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu (Public)

Rector, Romanian-American University (private)

Rector, University "Bogdan-Vodă" - has submitted an appeal for an evaluation at the institutional level (private) | |
| | 15 min | Review panel's private discussion | | |

10	**12:00** 45 min	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	*Representative of "Ovidius" University Constanța (public)* *Representative of University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest (public)* *Representative of Technical University "Gh. Asachi" Iași (public)* *Representative of University from Craiova (public)* *Representative of "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu (public)* *Representative of „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași (public)* *Representative of „Titu Maiorescu" University of Bucharest (private)* *Representative of Sapientia University of Cluj-Napoca (private, study programs in Hungarian)*	
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	60 min	Lunch (panel only)		

| 11 | **14:00**

45 min | Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool | *Representative of National University of Theatre and Film* "*I.L. Caragiale*" *from Bucharest (Bachelor, master studies; institutional)*

Representative of Technical University from Cluj Napoca (Bachelor, master studies)

Representative of "Carol I" National Defense University (distance education, doctoral studies)

Representative of West University of Timișoara (Bachelor, master studies),

Representative of Higher Colleges of Technology Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (doctoral studies and IOSUD) (online)

Representative of Masaryk University, Czech Republic (institutional and IOSUD) (available until 14.30, online)

Student, University of Bucharest (Bachelor, master studies; institutional)

Student, West University of Timișoara (Bachelor, master, doctoral studies; institutional) | |

			Representative of the Competition Council, Bucharest/ European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) (Bachelor EURACE label)	
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		

| 12 | **15:00**

45 min (60 minutes) | Meeting with stakeholders, such as employers, students, local community | <u>ARACIS Council</u>

President of National Unions Federation "Alma Mater", member to ARACIS Council

President of The National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR), member to ARACIS Council

President of The National Union of Students in Romania (UNSR), member to ARACIS Council

<u>*Consultative Commission (representing the Council of Rectors)*</u>

Representative of University of Bucharest (public)

Representative of Romanian – American University (private)

<u>*Other Stakeholders*</u>

Vice-president, National Authority for Qualifications (ANC)

Director, National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (CNRED)

President, Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education (ARACIP) | |
| | 15 min | Review panel's private discussion | | |

13	45 min	A session to further investigate additional topics that may arise during the site visit regarding agency's compliance with the ESG (as necessary)		
14	60 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions		
		[17.3.2023] – Day 3		
15	60 min	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify		

16	**10:30** 60 min	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues	*General Director*	
17	90 min	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings		
	60 min	Lunch (panel only)		

| 18 | **13:30**

30 min | Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings | *ARACIS Council President*

ARACIS Council Vice-President

Director of the ARACIS Council Quality External Evaluation Department

Secretary General of ARACIS Council

General Director

Director, Quality Assurance Department

Head of Programme Accreditation and Evaluation Service

Head of Institutional Accreditation and Evaluation Service

Head of Evaluation of Doctoral Studies Office

Head of Legal and Internal Quality Assurance Office | |

Targeted review of Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between ARACIS (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

October 2022

1. Background

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2009 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* coordinated by - The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

ARACIS has been a member of ENQA since 2009 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

ARACIS is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Programme Authorisation (First Cycle)[16]

- Programme Accreditation (First Cycle)[17]

- Programme Accreditation and awarding of EUR-ACE Label (First Cycle)[18]

- Programme Accreditation (Second Cycle)[19]

- Study domain Accreditation (Second Cycle)[20]

- Study domain accreditation (Third Cycle)[21]

- Institutional Evaluation[22]

- Evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD)[23]

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[16]   Programme external evaluation/accreditation (First Cycle, Second Cycle)
[17]   Programme external evaluation/accreditation (First Cycle, Second Cycle)
[18]   Programme external evaluation from the engineering field
[19]   Programme external evaluation/accreditation (First Cycle, Second Cycle)
[20]   Evaluation of master study domains
[21]   Evaluation of the establishment of new doctoral study domains
[22]   Institutional external evaluation/accreditation
[23]   Periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes (programme)

- Joint programme evaluations

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

Should anything change between the time of application and the review i.e. any type of changes that may affect the registered agency's substantial compliance with the ESG, the agency is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience[24].

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which ARACIS continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support ARACIS's application to EQAR.

The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

A)   Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision:

a.   Standard 2.7 – Complaints and appeals;

b.   Standard 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct;

B)   Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities:

a.   periodic external evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programmes (IOSUD);

b.   periodic external evaluation of doctoral domains (DSD);

c.   evaluation for the establishment of a new doctoral study domain

Attention should be particularly given to the following issues:

- How the agency ensures consistent decision making given the different approaches in the external QA of doctoral studies (ESG 2.5)

C)   Standards affected by other types of substantive changes:

a.   Does not apply

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[24]   See EQAR's policy on reporting changes https://www.eqar.eu/register/guide-for-agencies/reporting-and-renewal/

D)   ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance, in particular how ARACIS ensures sufficient coverage of ESG Part 1 in its evaluation of doctoral procedures (ESG 2.1).

E)   Selected enhancement area: ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

F)   Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any).

These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications* and *the Policy on Targeted Reviews*, and following the methodology described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

-       Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, ARACIS and The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);

-       Nomination and appointment of the review panel by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);

-       Self-assessment by ARACIS including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;

-       A site visit by the review panel to ARACIS;

-       Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;

-       Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;

-       Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;

-       Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board;

-       Attendance to the online follow-up seminar.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to ARACIS during the past 5 years, and conversely ARACIS has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of four members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least one of the four members is from another country.

At least one panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years. When requested by the agency under review or when considered particularly pertinent, other stakeholders (for example, a representative of the labour market) may be included in addition to the four panel members. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. At least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

Once appointed, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by ARACIS, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

ARACIS is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

-         a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;

-         a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);

-         a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG 2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);

-         a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;

-         for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which ARACIS fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule

shall be given to ARACIS at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;

- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;

- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR[25].

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If ARACIS chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the

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draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by ARACIS and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) will provide to ARACIS the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

4. Publication and use of the report

ARACIS will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in autumn 2023. The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	November 2022
Appointment of review panel members	November 2022
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by ARACIS	9 December 2022
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	December 2022
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January 2023
Briefing of review panel members	February 2023
Review panel site visit	March 2023
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	April 2023
Factual check of the review report by the ARACIS	May 2023
Statement of ARACIS to review panel (if applicable)	May 2023
Submission of review report to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)	June 2023
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	September 2023
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by ARACIS	Autumn 2023
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	Autumn 2023

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

ANC	National Authority for Qualifications
ANOSR	National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania
ARACIP	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education
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
CNRED	National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas
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
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENAEE	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
SAR	Self-assessment report
QA	Quality Assurance
UNSR	National Union of Students in Romania

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY ARACIS

ARACIS Budget figures 2018-2022

ARACIS Composition of the SAR work team

ARACIS external evaluation guides:

- Guide for the institutional external evaluation (automatically translated from Romanian)
- Programme Authorisation (First Cycle): Guide for study programmes external evaluation (automatically translated from Romanian)
- Programme Accreditation (First Cycle): Guide for study programmes external evaluation (automatically translated from Romanian)
- Guide for programme external evaluation and awarding of EUR-ACE Label (First Cycle) (automatically translated from Romanian)
- Programme Accreditation (Second Cycle): Guide for study programmes external evaluation (automatically translated from Romanian)
- Study domain accreditation (Second Cycle): Guide for master study domains periodical external evaluation (automatically translated from Romanian)
- Guide on conducting the process of external evaluation of IOSUD (accreditation and renewal of accreditation) (In English)
- Study domain accreditation (Third Cycle): Guide on conducting the process of renewal of accreditation of DSD (in English)
- Study domain authorisation (Third Cycle) Guide on conducting the process for setting up (establishment) of a new DSD (authorisation) (in English)

ARACIS Self- Assessment Report 2022

Compliance of the newly introduced EQA with standards of Part 1 of the ESG (Mapping grid)

Draft versions of analyses pertaining to evaluations of doctoral studies

Expectations for the self-selected enhancement area ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

General and individualised indicators for Institutional, Bachelor and Master-level evaluations

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

Procedure for solving of appeals submitted by higher education institutions

Selection of reports pertaining to appeals and complaints provided by ARACIS

- 3 Reports from appeals procedures
- 2 Reports from Complaints procedures

Selection of evaluation reports provided by ARACIS in English

- 5 Reports of Institutional evaluations
- 7 Reports on Evaluation of institutions organising doctoral study programs (IOSUD)

- 10 Reports on Study domain Accreditation (Third Cycle)
- 3 Reports on Study domain Authorisation (Third Cycle)

World Bank deliverables within the QAFIN Project

- Output 1. Quality Assurance in European Higher Education: Using Polarities to Compare Sound Practices in External Quality Assurance in Select Systems
- Output 2.1 Draft Recommendation for the Methodology for the Classification of Higher Education Institutions
- Output 2.2. Final Recommendation for the Methodology for the Classification of Higher Education Institutions after Public Consultations
- Output 3.1. Draft Recommendation for the Methodology for External Assessment of Higher Education Institutions and Associated Management Instruments
- Output 3.1. Annex - Quality Procedures Handbook
- Internal quality assurance (IQA) Guidelines
- Update of ARACIS Quality Assurance Methodology. Key adjustments and additions proposed
- Quality Assurance for Joint Programmes - dealing with the European Approach
- Output 3.1. Draft Recommendation for the Methodology for External Assessment of Higher Education Institutions and Associated Management Instruments - final
- Output 4_Training needs analysis on the assessment and classification instruments and methodologies
- Classifications and Rankings in Higher Education - Romina Miorelli with Rafael Llavori
- Current Practices of Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area Rafael Llavori (With Alina Sava and Romina Miorelli)
- Output 5. Recommendation for the Internal Manual of the Recipient
- Output 6. Recommendation for the Regulation of Organization and Functioning of the Recipient
- Output 7. Training and dissemination report

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

ARACIS external review report 2018

ARACIS 2020 follow-up report to ENQA

ARACIS Self- Assessment Report 2017

ARACIS Substantive Change Report 2021 to EQAR

ARACIS Substantive Change Report 2022 to EQAR

ARACIS Review 2023 Terms of Reference

ENQA Board's decision on ARACIS's review, including comments concerning areas for development

ENQA Board's letter in addition to the Membership decision of 1.10.2018

ENQA Board's letter regarding ARACIS's 2020 follow-up report 28.10.2020

EQAR Approval of the Application by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register

ESG European Standards and Guidelines for the external Quality Assurance of Higher Education

Selection of reports available at [Arhive Rezultate Evaluari - ARACIS](#) automatically translated from Romanian

Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies

ENQA TARGETED
REVIEW 2023

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Targeted
Review of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance
in Higher Education (ARACIS), undertaken in 2023.

enqa.

European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education