

External review of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)  
by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

## **Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE**

March 2017

### **1. Background and Context**

ARACIS was established in 2005 by Government Emergency Ordinance, approved by the Parliament as Law in 2006, to enhance QA in Higher Education according to the ESG 2005. ARACIS also took over accreditation of study programmes and institutions from the former Romanian National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation. ARACIS is an independent, autonomous public institution of national interest, funded from evaluation fees paid by HE institutions on contract-based relations, and from projects. The external evaluation Methodology was developed by ARACIS and approved by Governmental Decision No.1418/2006, initiated by the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research.

ARACIS' mission is to carry out the external quality evaluation of education provided by higher education institutions and by other organizations providing higher education study programmes, operating in Romania, with the aim of:

- Evaluating, according to quality criteria and standards, the capacity of education providers 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 National Education strategies and policies of permanently improving higher education quality, in close correlation with pre-university education.

The current activity is performed according to the "Methodology for quality assurance, provisional authorization and accreditation of study programs and of higher education institutions". Quality evaluation activities are detailed in the Guide approved by the Council. Evaluation of master Study Domains has been initiated following a procedure which is still in progress to be finalized. In addition to information presented in the **ARACIS FOLLOW-UP REPORT - SEPTEMBER 2015, and in "further clarifications letter" sent to ENQA on January 2016**, the "Procedures for accrediting/periodic external evaluation of the Master study programmes" were approved and applied from 28.04.2014 ([http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Comunicate\\_Media/2014/Proceduri\\_privind\\_acreditatea\\_sau\\_evaluarea\\_periodica\\_a\\_domeniilor\\_de\\_studii\\_universitare\\_de\\_master.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Comunicate_Media/2014/Proceduri_privind_acreditatea_sau_evaluarea_periodica_a_domeniilor_de_studii_universitare_de_master.pdf)).

Work on the detailed procedure for Master Study domains is still in progress. The Specific Procedure for the External Periodic Evaluation of Accredited Master Study domains (in the following parts of the document shall be referred to as the "Specific Procedure" or (SP)) was approved in 2014 by Ministerial Order, Published in the Official Gazette, Part I nr.236/2014:

[http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/OM\\_nr\\_146\\_din\\_2014.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/OM_nr_146_din_2014.pdf). The detailed ARACIS Procedure, following the approval of the Specific Procedure, was approved by ARACIS Council to make operational the provisions of the Specific Procedure approved by Ministerial Order. This document was published on the ARACIS webpage [http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Comunicate\\_Media/2014/Proceduri\\_privind\\_evaluarea\\_domeniilor\\_de\\_master\\_08.04.2014\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Comunicate_Media/2014/Proceduri_privind_evaluarea_domeniilor_de_master_08.04.2014_-_FINAL.pdf) (in Romanian).

The roll out of the Specific Procedure is in its initial phase and full implementation is scheduled to be finalized in 2018.

The agency shall draft and publish reports on evaluation of Master domains when the methodology for accreditation and evaluation of master domains has been finalized and is being rolled out. These reports would not always be connected with institutional evaluations, mainly because the evaluation of Master domains shall be still performed at different moments of time. At the moment, we estimate that evaluation of Master domains will begin to be performed together with evaluations of institutions in 2 year time.

The new Methodology based on ESG 2015 has been drafted and is now in process to be finalized together with external stakeholders – students’ unions, representatives of employers. The Guide, which details quality evaluation activities as per new Methodology based on ESG 2015, shall be approved by the Council.

ARACIS has been partner in several international projects and cooperation with ENQA and other QA agencies such as IMPALA\_EACEA\_LLL Project: Impact Analysis of Quality Assurance, AQUA-TS: exchange of good practice in VET quality indicators, EACEA\_LLL Project, participation in ENQA Working Groups of Staff Development and Excellence.

Collaboration with other agencies was stimulated by ARACIS membership in CEENQA, which proposed international experts within the framework of the project “Qualitas” (2014-2015) funded from EU funds. Cooperation with agencies members of Quality Audit Network (QAN) indentified common areas of interest and led to a joint publication. Several common activities, such as those with l’Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie - AUF and under the framework of Pro Didactica Project 2016 – 2018 have been dedicated to the training of Evaluators and Staff of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Professional Education - ANACIP, R. of Moldova.

In addition, ARACIS has evaluated 17 Study Programs in Law studies in the Republic of Moldova (2014) finalized by a transversal report in 2015.

**ARACIS has been a full member of ENQA since 2009** and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership for the second time. The previous ENQA coordinated review was performed in 2013 and successfully finalized with recommendations. The ENQA Board requested a follow-up report by October 2015 on the actions ARACIS has undertaken to meet the recommendations. In particular, ARACIS was encouraged to strive for greater transparency, communicating its findings to non-specialist audiences, publishing more information about itself, on its website and in ways that make that information more readily available. It was mentioned that the next external review will give special attention to these points. After answering clarifications requested by the ENQA Board regarding the follow-up report, at its meeting on 16 February 2016, the ENQA Board considered the letter from ARACIS (dated 27 January 2016) that had been requested on 20 November 2015 concerning the involvement of

students in quality assurance procedures at ARACIS. The Board acknowledged the letter and took note that full implementation concerning standard 2.4 of the ESG will be in place by 2018.

**ARACIS has been registered on EQAR since 2009** and is applying for renewal of registration for the second time. The first renewal application was accepted in 2014.

The Register Committee considered the Substantive Change Report of 3/3/2016. The Register Committee sought and received clarification from ARACIS on some matters (request of 18/05/16 and response of 13/06/16).

The Register Committee took note of the changes in the composition of the ARACIS Council. The Committee welcomed the now broader representation of different stakeholder backgrounds on the Council. The Register Committee took note of the newly established procedures for the (I.) external evaluation of Master Study domains, (II.) accreditation of a new Master Study domain and (III.) inclusion of a new Master Study programme in an accredited Master Study domain.

The Register Committee welcomed ARACIS' clarification as to the publication of the relevant procedures and criteria (re. II. & III.), as well as the explanation of how they correspond to the ESG. As the documents are not published in English, the Register Committee could not analyse the way in which the relevant procedures and criteria are published and clear. The Committee therefore underlined that the next external review of ARACIS (for renewal of registration on EQAR) should pay due attention to the way in which the relevant criteria and procedures are published (see standards 2.3 and 2.5, ESG 2015), next to the remaining standards of the ESG 2015.

## **2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation**

This review, will evaluate the way in which and to what extent ARACIS fulfils the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of ARACIS should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support ARACIS's application to the register.

The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting membership.

### **2.1 Activities of ARACIS within the scope of the ESG**

In order for ARACIS to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of ARACIS that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is regardless of whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

The following activities of ARACIS have to be addressed in the external review:

- External evaluation of study programmes: 1<sup>st</sup> cycle (“licenta”) and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle (“master”);
- External evaluation of Higher Education Institutions (institutional evaluation/audit);
- External evaluation of master study domains.

The external review shall also address the activity of ARACIS to implement the recommendations of ENQA and EQAR, which were mentioned at section 1 of these Terms of Reference and the results obtained, according to the ESG 2015.

### **3. The Review Process**

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in line with the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-assessment by ARACIS including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to ARACIS;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel’s and/or ENQA Board’s recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary follow-up visit.

#### **3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members**

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts, an academic employed by a higher education institution, student member, and eventually a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews 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. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency under review. In this case an additional fee to cover the reviewer’s fee and travel expenses is applied.

In addition to the four members, the panel will be supported by the ENQA Secretariat review coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA expectations are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member 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 ARACIS with the list of suggested experts with their respective curriculum vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards ARACIS's review.

### **3.2 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 is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part II and III) addressed individually. All agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- 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 meets the ESG and thus the requirements of ENQA membership.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat who has 4 weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny 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 whether the necessary information, as stated in the ENQA Guidelines for External Review of Quality Assurance Agencies, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case 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 reject the report and ask for a revised version within 4 weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 € will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

### **3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel**

ARACIS will draw up a draft proposal of the schedule for the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2,5 days. 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 review panel will be assisted by ARACIS in arriving in Bucharest, Romania.

The site visit will close with an oral presentation and discussion of the major issues of the evaluation between the review panel and ARACIS.

### **3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report**

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to ARACIS within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If ARACIS chooses to provide a statement in reference to the 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, finalise the document and submit it to ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG*, so as to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.

ARACIS is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which ARACIS expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be discussed along with the final evaluation report.

### **4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report**

ARACIS will consider the expert panel's report and will publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has made its decision. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. ARACIS commits to preparing a follow-up plan in which it addresses the recommendations of the review panel and to submitting a follow-up report to the ENQA Board. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report will be complemented by a small-scale visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered as of particular importance or challenge by ARACIS. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or compliance of the agency with the ESG. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

### **5. Use of the report**

ENQA shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the expert panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in ENQA.

The review report is used by the Board of ENQA for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether ARACIS has met the ESG and can be thus admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report will also be used for registration on EQAR, and is designed so as to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by the ENQA Board. Once submitted to ARACIS and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by ARACIS, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. ARACIS may use the report at its discretion only after the Board has approved of the report. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on membership.

The Chair of the panel shall remain available to respond to questions of clarification or further information from the EQAR Register Committee provided that the ENQA Secretariat is copied in all such requests.

## 6. Budget

ARACIS shall pay the following review related fees:

Fee of the Chair	4,500 EUR
Fee of the Secretary	4,500 EUR
Fee of the 2 other panel members	4,000 EUR (2,000 EUR each)
Fee of 2 panel members for follow-up visit	1,000 EUR (500 EUR each)
Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat	7,000 EUR
Experts Training fund	1,400 EUR
Approximate travel and subsistence expenses	6,000 EUR
Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000.00 EUR VAT excl. for a review team of 4 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, ARACIS will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to ARACIS if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

The fee of the follow-up visit is included in the overall cost of the review and will not be reimbursed in case the agency does not wish to benefit from it.

In the event of a second site visit required by the Board and aiming at completing the assessment of compliance, and should the agency accept a second visit, an additional fee of 500 EUR per expert, as well as travel and subsistence costs are recoverable from the agency.

## 7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

Agreement on terms of reference	March/May 2017
Appointment of review panel members	November/December 2017
Self-assessment completed	November 2017
Pre-screening of SER by ENQA coordinator	December 2017

Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January/February 2018
Briefing of review panel members	February 2018
Review panel site visit	March 2018
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA coordinator for pre-screening	By May 2018
Draft of evaluation report to ARACIS	Late May/Early June 2018
Statement of ARACIS to review panel if necessary	June 2018
Submission of final report to ENQA	July 2018
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response of ARACIS	September 2018
Publication of the report	September 2018