

## Approval of the Application

by ARACIS - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher

Education (ARACIS)

for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register

Register Committee  
[2-3 April 2019]

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Application of:	09/03/2017
Agency registered since:	07/10/2009
External review report of:	13/09/2018
Review coordinated by:	ENQA - European Association for Quality Assurance of Higher Education
Review panel members:	David William Cairns (chair), Agnes Leinweber, Hannele Marjatta Niemi (academic), Simona Dimovska (student)
Decision of:	03/04/2019
Registration until:	30/09/2023
Absented themselves from decision-making:	nobody
Attachments:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">Confirmation of eligibility, 24/03/2017</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">External Review Report, 13/09/2018</a></li> <li>3. <a href="#">Request to the Review Panel, 12/11/2018</a></li> <li>4. <a href="#">Clarification by the Review Panel, 26/11/2018</a></li> </ol>

1. The application of 09/03/2017 adhered to the requirements of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.
2. The Register Committee confirmed eligibility of the application on 24/03/2017.
3. The Register Committee considered the external review report of 13/09/2018 on the compliance of ARACIS with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015 version).
4. The Register Committee further considered the Substantive Change Report on the evaluation procedure of Master Studies Domains (of 28/09/2018).
5. The Register Committee sought and received clarification from the chair of the review panel (of 26/11/2018).
6. The Register Committee invited ARACIS to make additional representation on the grounds for possible rejection on 18/12/2018. The

Register Committee considered ARACIS's additional representation of 15/02/2019.

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## Analysis:

7. In considering ARACIS's compliance with the ESG, the Register Committee took into account:
  - *Programme External Evaluation/ Accreditation - First Cycle, Second Cycle.*
  - *Institutional External Evaluation/ Accreditation.*
  - *Evaluation of Master Study Domains.*
  - *Programme External Evaluation from the engineering field (for the EUR-ACE Label).*
  - *Reviews carried out abroad (Moldova).*
8. The Register Committee found that the report provides sufficient evidence and analysis on ARACIS's level of compliance with the ESG.
9. With regard to the specific European Standards and Guidelines, the Register Committee considered the following:

### ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

The Register Committee noted that according to the self-evaluation report (SAR p. 33) consistency in the external QA activities of ARACIS is assured through the work of the Permanent Speciality Commissions that prepare decisions for the Council in their respective field of studies.

As the Register Committee could not corroborate the agency's statement in the analysis of the review report, the Committee sought further clarification from the panel.

In its response letter the panel stated that it is the responsibility of each Permanent Speciality Commission to ensure that judgements in ARACIS reports are accurate and consistent and the panel was convinced that all processes defined in the Methodology are implemented consistently.

Having found limited information in the panel's analysis on the functioning of provisional authorisation for programmes and higher education institutions, the Committee has asked the panel to confirm that the key features of ESG 2.3 (self-assessment, external assessment, site visit, review report, follow-up) are implemented by ARACIS in these reviews.

In its response letter the panel confirmed that following the detailed examination of ARACIS's Methodology and Guide, the agency followed the same procedures for provisional authorisation as the ones employed for the evaluation of accredited programmes, which were addressed by the panel in its review report (p. 31).

Having considered the panel's clarification the Register Committee was able to concur with the panel's conclusion that ARACIS complies with the standard.

The Committee nevertheless underlined the panel's suggestion on the need to further develop the follow-up procedures of the agency and to consider how institutions have addressed the ARACIS's recommendations in their evaluation reports.

#### ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

In its last review, the Register Committee flagged the participation of students in ARACIS's programme level reviews.

The Register Committee noted that ARACIS has formally adopted in 2017 a decision to include students in all programme level evaluation panels. While the panel confirmed the practice of involving students as review experts in all ARACIS's reviews, including at programme level, the panel added that at the time of its review the agency had had little practical experience. The panel further commented that "*some evaluation panels treated student members as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators in the review exercise and that some evaluators were not attuned to the necessity for 'student centeredness' in higher education and what that required of tutors and of them as evaluators.*" (Review Report, p. 35)

In its additional representation ARACIS stated that it was surprised by the review panel's assessment and argued that the review report does not provide information on how many of these situations evaluation panels treated student members "as supernumeraries and not as full partner-evaluators". The agency only heard of a few cases from student representatives in the Council but no formal complaints have ever been submitted. Considering the high number of external evaluations ARACIS carries out, the agency found that, in fact, such situations were rather the exception than common practice.

ARACIS also commented that its policies and procedures gave students equal rights and obligations i.e. the coverage of mission costs and remuneration is the same as for the other members, and that students are required to participate in the Council, the Permanent Speciality Commission and expert panels. (p. 8-9) ARACIS further added that one of the aspects considered in the selection process of the Permanent Speciality Commission in 2018 was the understanding of students' role and involvement in quality assurance activities.

The Register Committee noted that, while ARACIS regularly offers training sessions for its evaluators, the panel found that the format for training sessions offered few opportunities for learning through simulation and practical exercise and that the 'virtual' and 'online' training were lacking in efficacy.

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In the additional representation, ARACIS clarified that the e-platform is a complementary facility to the face to face training sessions and not a substitute. The platform offers access to courses on ARACIS procedures, analysis and evaluation sheets (forms) and it is used to disseminate information on evaluations. ARACIS explained that the trainings for experts are thematic and concentrate on the methodology for external evaluation, standards and performance indicators, including real life simulations. The agency provided a list of past training sessions focused on the practical activity of the Permanent Speciality Commissions.

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**Having considered the additional representation the Register Committee concluded that ARACIS has addressed the flag and was therefore able to concur with the review panel's conclusion of compliance with ESG 2.4.**

### ESG 2.6 Reporting

In its previous decision to renew registration the Register Committee flagged for attention ARACIS's involvement of expert panels in drafting and agreeing upon the review report for institutional evaluations.

To address the flagged issues the panel noted that ARACIS decided to prepare a comprehensive synthetic report in which each of the expert panel members have a contribution. The panel also commented that separate reports from students and international evaluators are still a feature of the agency's reporting arrangements.

While the Register Committee welcomed the panel's recommendations on improving the accessibility, storage, organisation and presentation of review decisions and reports on its website, it considered that ARACIS technically fulfilled the requirements of the standard by publishing the reports on the web. The Register Committee however noted that the full accessibility of reports remains an issue as long as some reports are published in an archived or scanned format.

**The Register Committee concluded that ARACIS largely addressed the flag and was therefore unable to concur with the review panel's judgement of partial compliance, but concluded that ARACIS complies with standard 2.6.**

### ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

The Register Committee noted that ARACIS does not have a permanent appeals body but with each new case an ad hoc commission is established by the Executive Board to deal with. The agency explained that the small number of appeals and complaints it has received to date did not justify moving to more permanent arrangements of handling complaints and appeals.

The Register Committee found that the involvement of the Executive Board of the Council in establishing appeals committees might interfere with the integrity of the decision making process and has therefore asked the panel for further information on the criteria and selection procedure of the ad-hoc Appeals Committee members.

The panel noted in its response letter that it has no information on the criteria ARACIS follows when it constitutes ad hoc panels and that the panel was uneasy with the ad hoc approach.

The documentation provided by the agency in its additional representation shows that the nomination of Appeals Commission members follows ARACIS' operational procedure 'Solutions of appeals of higher education institutions'.

The agency explained that its (ad-hoc) Appeals Commission includes one member of the consultative commission (i.e. academics, former Council or Commissions members), external evaluators from the National Register of Evaluators and one inspector from the Quality Assurance Direction (technical department of ARACIS). Over the past four years the Appeals Commissions received 46 appeals, about 1.93% of the total of number of external evaluations performed by ARACIS.

ARACIS argued that the Executive Board is delegated to manage the activity of the agency and therefore is involved in the selection process of Appeals Commission members. The selection process follows strictly defined criteria that would not allow the Executive Board's interference with the decision making on the appeal.

**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.**

### **ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance**

The Register Committee noted the review panel's concerns with the internal arrangements of the agency and has therefore asked the panel to clarify in what way have these arrangements affected ARACIS' operations.

In its response letter, the panel stated that its concerns referred to the oversight of ARACIS' operations rather than the operations themselves i.e. in particular how the Council ensured an effective "oversight" of the agency's work considering that the Executive Board was closely involved in managing and overseeing these operations.

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The Committee was unable to follow the panel's concerns, as it was not obvious how exactly the organisational arrangements (negatively) affected the agency's operations.

With regards to the agency's vision mission and strategy, the panel stated that ARACIS "does not have a strategic plan that spans several years and does not appear to set targets for itself against which its Council and others can measure the Agency's performance" (Review report p. 17).

Considering the involvement of stakeholders, the Register Committee noted that this is limited to representatives of students and employers sitting in ARACIS Council and Permanent Speciality Commissions. In the view of the panel, ARACIS tended to define the term 'stakeholder' narrowly, confining it to students, employers and trades union representatives and the panel was not confident that ARACIS understands the need to involve stakeholders more fully in the work of the Council and the work of ARACIS.

In its additional representation, ARACIS noted that it has followed up on the recommendations of the panel and it has developed a Strategic plan for the period 2018-2021 and the operational plans for 2018 and 2019, which were approved by the ARACIS Council. The Register Committee could verify the published plans.

The agency further provided a detailed overview on how representatives of stakeholders i.e. academics, representatives of students, representatives of employers and employers' federation, representative of trade-unions, including one representative of ESU and ENQA.- participate in the council and different commissions of ARACIS.

ARACIS further explained that it has recently approved the inclusion of representatives of employers in the permanent Speciality Commissions, with priority the Commission of Engineering Sciences that awards the EUR-ACE label, and that the selection process for new members will be soon initiated.

The agency added that it has put forward a project application for "Stakeholder Engagement in QA" under a call of the Erasmus+ programme. The project aims to promote the diversification of stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance activities across EHEA and to provide the means for making the involvement of stakeholders effective.

**The Register Committee welcomed the agency's newly adopted strategic and operational work plans and was satisfied with the level of stakeholder involvement in the work and governance of the agency. The Register Committee therefore could not follow the panel's conclusion of partial compliance and concluded that ARACIS complies with ESG 3.1.**

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### 3.4 – Thematic analysis

While the panel found that none of the research projects described by ARACIS in its self assessment report met the requirement of the standard, the panel nevertheless formed the view that the agency is (fully) compliant with ESG 3.4, based on the Quality Barometer reports produced for 2009, 2010 and 2015.

The Register Committee could not conclude on the basis of the panel’s analysis whether the agency made use of the outcomes of these analysis and whether the Barometer reports are conducted on a regular basis. The Committee has therefore asked the panel for further clarifications.

In its response the panel stated that it was keen to see that ARACIS continues its commitment to the Quality Barometer series and reiterated its appreciation for the agency’s dedication in preparing them, even though it comes at a substantial financial and management burden on the agency.

With a view to the application of Quality Barometers, the panel stated that they are used by ARACIS to engage with quality professionals, academics, students, and others throughout Romania and to disseminate aspects related to higher education to interested parties.

**In light of the panel’s clarification the Register Committee concurred with the panel’s conclusion that ARACIS complies with ESG 3.4.**

### 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The review report noted an improvement in the agency’s internal quality assurance process and encouraged ARACIS to continue with its work to introduce IQA, seeking ways to express its quality assurance expectations for its evaluation and other academic-based activities.

The panel also stressed the need for ARACIS’s internal QA to be improved so as to support the work of its speciality commissions, responsible for the consistency check of evaluation reports and for preparing the Council’s decisions. The panel found that the members of Permanent Speciality Commissions do not have access to the searchable digital copies of evaluation reports, and that they are provided with a pile of reports the day before the meeting, thus being prevented in making their own judgements on the findings of individual reports.

While the panel stated that ARACIS newly introduced comprehensive IQA procedures and new staff member will provide the agency with a sound basis for reviewing and improving the effectiveness with which it works, the Register Committee found this has not been implemented at the time of the review, in particular in supporting the internal activity of its speciality commissions.

ARACIS explained in its additional representation that the procedure to fill in the positions for the Internal public audit department has been delayed due to a temporary staff hiring interdiction in the public sector.

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As the interdiction has been lifted the agency started to fill in these positions.

The agency further stated that the Permanent Speciality Commissions are supported in their work by the experts and speciality inspectors for accreditation and quality assurance (permanent staff of the agency) providing all the logistics and necessary material. After the site visit each member of the Permanent Speciality Commission receives by e-mail, for analysis, the documents drafted by the visit panel. The panel coordinator of the site visit also presents the results in front of the Permanent Specialty Commission who takes the final decision.

According to the agency the documentation on previous external evaluations and recommendations can be found on the ARACIS website, searchable using keywords.

The Register Committee found that indeed reports can be found using keywords, however the content of reports can not be searched by keywords. The Committee also noted that the agency has made little progress in making its reports machine-readable (p. 5) since its last review.

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.**

10. For the remaining standards, the Register Committee was able to concur with the review panel's analysis and conclusion without further comments.

### Conclusion:

11. Based on the external review report and the considerations above, the Register Committee concluded that ARACIS demonstrated compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3) as follows:

Standard	Review panel conclusion	Register Committee conclusion
2.1	Substantial compliance	Compliance
2.2	Substantial compliance	Compliance
2.3	Full compliance	Compliance
2.4	Full compliance	Compliance
2.5	Full compliance	Compliance
2.6	Partial compliance	Compliance

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2.7	Full compliance	Partial compliance
3.1	Partial compliance	Compliance
3.2	Full compliance	Compliance
3.3	Full compliance	Compliance
3.4	Full compliance	Compliance
3.5	Substantial compliance	Compliance
3.6	Substantial compliance	Partial compliance
3.7	(not expected)	Compliance (by virtue of applying)

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12. The Register Committee considered that ARACIS only achieved partial compliance with some standards. In its holistic judgement, the Register Committee concluded that these are specific and limited issues, but that ARACIS continues to comply substantially with the ESG as a whole.
13. The Register Committee therefore approved the application for renewal of inclusion on the Register. ARACIS's renewed inclusion shall be valid until 30/09/2023<sup>1</sup>.
14. The Register Committee further underlined that ARACIS is expected to address the issues mentioned appropriately and to resolve them at the earliest opportunity as well as to inform EQAR through Substantive Change Reports where required.

<sup>1</sup> Inclusion is valid for five years from the date of the external review report, see §4.1 of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.