Final

ARACIS Audit Report

European Students' Union

September 2008

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Introduction

At the London Ministerial Summit of the Bologna Process in 2007, The European Students' Union (ESU) noted positively that students are increasingly becoming a partner in the quality assurance of higher education. Students are increasingly invited to discussions organised by higher education institutions or the agencies responsible for external quality assurance as well as in their day-to-day work, although improvement can still be made. Consequently, ESU has been one of the founding members of the European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (EQAR) since March 2008. Now, for the first time in its history, ESU has been invited to carry out a thorough review of a national quality assurance and accreditation agency from a student perspective.

The review is carried out in the context of ARACIS' prospected membership of the EQAR as well its wish to improve student participation within quality assurance in Romania. The review has built upon some of the evidence collected by the European University Association which is parallelly carrying out a review and it is the explicit hope of the study visit team that the review will contribute to the projected review by ENQA that is scheduled for early next year. The basis for this review is the document 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (European Standards and Guidelines or ESG) that are used by the E4 and social partners as the criteria for the inclusion of quality assurance agencies in the EQAR.

The review assesses the performance of ARACIS on three fields. First, the organisation's mission and strategy to achieve this mission are assessed in the general context of the Romanian higher education system. Secondly, the performance of ARACIS is assessed based on the 'European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education' and the 'European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies' (parts two and three of the ESG). Thirdly, a specific analysis of ARACIS is made with regards to student participation, based on the ESG as well as ESU's expertise in the field.

As the study visit team considers that a final assessment of the compliance with the ESG can only be made by all partners in quality assurance jointly, (involving all actors convened in the EQAR), it will only assess the performance of ARACIS on the specific standards. It has thus not aimed to make a final conclusion about ARACIS' compliance with the ESG. The review team has found mostly positive points, although there is also a clear need for improvement under some aspects. The report will conclude with some general considerations about quality assurance in Romania.

The study visit team would like to congratulate ARACIS for being the first quality assurance agency that has invited ESU to carry out a full review of its activities, based on the European Standards and Guidelines. It would also like to thank the staff of ARACIS for being a warm host during the study visit.

September 2008,

Koen Geven, Katja Kamšek, Viorel Proteasa.

Executive Summary

ARACIS was established in 2005 by an emergency ordinance of the government, which was modified and adopted by the Parliament one year later. It took over from its predecessor, the accreditation organisation CNEAA, with a mission to improve the quality as well as accredit Romanian higher education programmes and institutions. Being established after the Ministerial Summit in Bergen, it has based its work on the 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area'. In a short period of time that followed, ARACIS has established itself firmly in the context of the Romanian higher education system and has kept a strong independence.

The study visit team has mostly found positive points, although there is also room for improvement. It is a trustworthy quality assurance and accreditation organisation that plays a vital role for all stakeholders. The European Standards and Guidelines are being taken seriously by all involved in the work of ARACIS and give a certain authority to their formal judgements. Very important for the context in which it operates, is that it promotes a move towards a modern, student-centred higher education system, following the European reforms stemming from the Bologna Process.

The study visit team has found three main problems in ARACIS in relation to its mission and the ESG. Firstly, there exists a strong focus on quantitative indicators and detail. It is engaged in a search to find 'objective' evidence in order to take accreditation decisions, leading away from quality assurance and continuous quality improvement. In particular in the evaluation of study programmes, the quality assurance function is hardly visible. Secondly, ARACIS uses a very complex way of reporting in its quality assurance procedures. Many different reports are drafted by different evaluation experts, and many different bodies modify and approve the report before a final decision is made by the highest governing body. Thirdly, students are now participating in ARACIS, but are far away from being an equal partner on all levels of its activities. Students are often seen as interesting sources of information, rather than as a serious actor with decision making powers. If ARACIS wants to be fully compliant with the European standards and guidelines, it should address these problems in a serious way.

Many of the problems that have surfaced in this evaluation have already been addressed by ARACIS in its self-evaluation report. The solutions that the study visit team considers to be helpful, are therefore rooted in the work that has already been done. Firstly, it should further promote the idea of a quality culture, both to its own experts as to the higher education institutions that are evaluated. The reports should become more open and more critical towards quality improvement for everyone who is involved in the process. Secondly, a simplified reporting procedure, built on consensus, should lead to more transparency and ownership over the reports and their recommendations. Thirdly, student involvement can be enhanced by including them formally in the ARACIS governing bodies, including them in evaluation teams for study programmes, building a larger student expert pool in cooperation with the student unions and mixing them better with the other experts.

The leadership of ARACIS seems committed to improving the organisation, through numerous reviews. The study visit team is therefore confident that ARACIS will be able to improve quickly and serve the Romanian higher education system even better than it does now. It hopes to have made a valuable contribution to this process and hopes that its recommendations will be regarded as important input for the national debates about the aims and methods of quality assurance in

Romania.

Terms of Reference

The European Students' Union (ESU) has been invited to conduct an audit of ARACIS, the quality assurance agency in Romania. This review took place between July and September 2008.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of the audit by ESU is to provide ARACIS an international perspective on the participation of students in the QA activities of the agency, in view to prepare ARACIS in its application to become a full member of ENQA and actively participate in European wide projects.

The specific objectives are to assess:

> *The quality assurance experience that had been accrued by CNEAA and the improvements brought about by ARACIS, through an examination of its new procedures and methodologies, especially those involving students, their applications and the results*

> *The compliance of the agency with the European Standards and Guidelines*

Purposes and scope of the audit of ARACIS

To meet the strategic needs of ARACIS at this stage of its development, the audit has several distinct, but related purposes.

The audit evaluates the role of students in the effectiveness of the ARACIS' performance since its establishment having particular regard to the policies and procedures that ARACIS has developed and how they are being implemented and operated. In particular, it evaluates how ARACIS is serving its stakeholders, primarily students and university staff, in addition to external actors such as employers and the general public.

Also, the audit aims to assist ARACIS in achieving its own quality enhancement goals and to further develop participation of students. It is envisaged that the process will assist ARACIS in identifying any constraints or opportunities that arise for the organisation in meeting its aims and goals. The audit does this by facilitating reflection on:

- The mission, aims and objectives of ARACIS and the systems and procedures in place to involve students and their suitability to fulfilling the mission
- The quality measures in use including feedback from students

The audit has a particular focus on ARACIS' role as a quality assurance agency in the Romanian higher education, following the developments in the European Higher Education Area.

The audit evaluates the extent to which ARACIS complies with the standards for external quality assurance agencies as set out in the recently adopted European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

There are eight such standards which relate to:

- €€€€€€€€ The agency's use of the external quality assurance procedures for higher education as set out in the European Standards and Guidelines
- €€€€€€€€ The official status of the agency

- €€€€€€€€ The regularity of the agency's engagement in external quality assurance activities

- €€€€€€€€ The adequacy of the agency's human and financial resources

- €€€€€€€€ The clarity of the agency's goals as set out in a publicly available mission statement

- €€€€€€€€ The independence of the agency with regard to its decision-making processes and especially in relation to government and higher education institutions

- €€€€€€€€ The use of external quality assurance criteria and processes involving self-assessment by the review subject, external expert review, publication of review outcomes and follow-up process

- €€€€€€€€ The internal accountability procedures of the agency

Full terms of reference can be found in Annex 1.

Expert panel

ESU has appointed a panel of three members:

Koen Geven, student of political science at the University of Amsterdam, former project leader for quality assurance in the Dutch National Union of Students (LSVb), former member of the executive of LSVb and former chairperson of ESU.

Katja Kamsek, student of pharmacy at the University of Ljubljana, trainer in quality assurance, former president of the international committee of the Slovenian Student Union, former member of ESU's executive committee.

Viorel Proteasa, student of Business Administration at the West University of Timisoara, former President of the Romanian National Union of Students (ANOSR) and former member of ESU's executive committee.

All members are students and have many years of experience in the representation of students. They have extensive knowledge on the European Standards and Guidelines, as they have been part of their drafting or their use in the discussions leading to the founding of the EQAR.

Schedule of the evaluation

Self-evaluation by ARACIS	Report was sent to ESU in July 2008
Site visit	26-29 August 2008
Final report	10 September 2008

Methodology

The team of evaluators understand their mission as addressing three different areas:

1. Develop an understanding and evaluation of the mission of ARACIS, its methods to implement this mission and its ways of improving itself in the context of the Romanian higher education system.

2. Assess the performance of ARACIS, following the European Standards and Guidelines.

3. Assess student participation in ARACIS in relation to the European Standards and Guidelines.

To this end, a list of questions was designed in order to make a comprehensive analysis of ARACIS on all areas. Specifically, for the third area (student participation), the team analysed the European Standards and Guidelines with a focus on the most important aspects from a student perspective. The documentation that was provided to the team (in particular the self-evaluation report and the independent evaluation) was analysed with these questions in mind and interviews were carried out with the internal bodies of ARACIS as well as its main stakeholders. The team met with the following internal bodies of ARACIS:

- The leadership of ARACIS (the executive bureau as well as its council in its entirety);
- the quality assurance department;
- the accreditation department;
- the consultative commission;
- the ethics commission;
- the technical staff;
- the inspectorate staff;
- members of the expert evaluator pool from both the student and the professor side.

From ARACIS' external partners, ESU met with:

- The members of two legislative bodies, being the senate commission and the deputies chamber commission on education;
- a representative of the ministry of education, research and youth;
- the representatives of two student unions (ANOSR, member of ESU and UNSR);
- representatives of the rectors conference;
- representatives of universities that underwent an institutional evaluation;
- teachers' trade union representatives;
- business representatives.

The interviews were carried out at the ARACIS premises and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. To create an open atmosphere in which pluralism was encouraged, the names of the interviewees are kept confidential.

Context of the Romanian Higher Education System

ARACIS functions in a context of a national higher education system and culture. As this culture both limits and strengthens ARACIS in its work, an analysis of the organisation cannot be made without describing it. As there are too many factors to describe about Romania, which as a very interesting history, we have limited our description to the core elements affecting quality assurance in higher education.

An expanding higher education system

Since the beginning of the nineties, higher education began to expand very quickly in Romania. Both in terms of student numbers and in terms of higher education providers, higher education experienced an enormous growth. Private higher education institutions were allowed to operate, and every major city wanted to have at least one university. In the academic year 2005/2006, more than 700.000 students were studying in 56 public and 52 private universities. Media, students, academic and the wider public consistently expressed its doubts on whether all the new (and some old) institutions were able to deliver the quality that was needed in modern Romanian society. The Romanian accreditation agency CNEAA (the predecessor of ARACIS) was set up to clean out the bad academic programmes from this quickly expanding system. However, as the agency was not as effective as it should be and serious concerns persisted on a number of universities, an agency was needed that could accredit both institutions and programmes. Also, as the old agency was not in track with European developments in the Bologna Process, in particular the new paradigm of student centred learning and the focus on quality improvement, the new agency had to substantially update the methodology. Establishing the new agency was thus not an easy process, solved by an emergency government ordinance, establishing ARACIS in 2005. The proof that the agency is needed probably lies in the fact that a number of private universities do not accept its judgements and have barred the agency from evaluating their work. It is therefore not so strange that nearly all interviewees mentioned that the strongest point of ARACIS is the fact that it merely *exists*. Concerns remain about the quality of higher education in Romania, especially considering the enormous differences between higher education institutions. A strong accreditation and quality assurance agency such as ARACIS is clearly needed in this context.

A traditional relation between students and teachers

ARACIS promotes the developments in the Bologna Process, although it finds itself in a context of slow reform because of traditional academic structures. While the Bologna reforms are making their way within Romanian higher education, the relation between students and their teachers is still very hierarchical. In our interviews, we often heard statements such as 'students have an interest to maintain low quality education in order to study less', 'the role of students in quality of education is firstly that they should study hard', or 'students are an interesting partner in quality of education, but far from equal to professors'. The Bologna Process, which is progressively being implemented in Romania, provides a number of action lines that encourage the move towards a more student centred higher education system, in particular with reference to the ECTS system, learning outcomes and student mobility. The evidence gathered by ESU in its Bologna With Student Eyes survey confirms that while an ECTS system is in place, its features are only partly implemented. The fact that Romanian institutions mostly do not yet issue a diploma supplement (giving an overview over the students' achieved outcomes) provides more evidence that the move to a student centred institution is a major challenge for Romanian higher education. Also, Romanian students see that mobility is a major problem, especially between Romanian higher education institutions themselves. For quality assurance, this poses particular problems, as students are not encouraged to voice their opinions or participate in assessments. Student unions and ARACIS jointly cooperate in multiple ways to promote student participation, and are playing an important role in the

development of the thinking about the study process in the classroom.

A history that limits the understanding of quality improvement

As ARACIS had a predecessor that contributed to the image of accreditation, it has been left with a history that did not help it develop along European lines of thinking. The accreditation that CNEAA provided was focused mostly on quantitative input-based indicators (such as the number of seats in a classroom, the ratio between students and teachers, etc.) and did not develop a policy of continuous quality improvement. While European processes mostly underline the quality assurance processes within higher education institutions themselves and focus on continuous quality improvement, this was not part of the old accreditation agency. Furthermore, the only role that was given to students in the system was to be interviewed by an evaluation panel during a site visit at a higher education institution. Students were not considered a viable partner of the council of CNEAA that took decisions on accreditation, and neither did any student take part in a site-visit team. Many of the staff in ARACIS was also staff of CNEAA and most of the professors in doing the site-visits are still active in the current activities of ARACIS. While the leadership of ARACIS and stakeholders are aware of the European processes and are often already using them, the agency is still held back by some of its history, which is seen by all stakeholders to be (sometimes too) slowly fading.

Lack of tradition of internal quality assurance in institutions

While a few Romanian higher education institutions seem to have well developed (or are quickly developing) internal quality assurance procedures, nearly all institutions experience large problems with this policy. If we disregard a few good examples, we can see that the worry about internal quality assurance in many higher education institutions in Romania only started when ARACIS was established in 2005. This culture can also be observed in the lack of student participation in - and sometimes their lack of enthusiasm for - institutional quality assurance discussions. ARACIS promotes internal quality assurance, by making it an integral aspect of its institutional evaluations as well as developing joint projects with higher education institutions. The lack of experience in this field however limits the use of national quality assurance and accreditation schemes.

Detailed Regulations

As a number of higher education institutions did not trust a semi-public body to have the authority to pass judgements about their work, the government pushed for a detailed law on quality assurance when establishing ARACIS. The aim of this approach was to build as much legal support for the agency's activities as possible by ensuring that the judgements of the agency are based on legally established procedures which would be hard to challenge in court. However, in particular with regards to the methodology that ARACIS uses, a number of inconveniences have arisen. Many of the interviewees express the wish to have a separate methodology for accreditation and quality assurance, as well as a differentiated focus between programme evaluation and institutional evaluation. Also, by limiting ARACIS' staff to a specific number (a maximum of 35) and limiting student participation to institutional evaluations, the law is not as advanced as the thinking in the leadership of ARACIS and major stakeholders. As all this is regulated by laws that are very hard to change, ARACIS is being held back by the detail of the regulations.

Establishing an independent authority

As the former accreditation organisation CNEAA still functioned under the auspices of the Parliament, it was a specific challenge to show that ARACIS would be independent in its

judgements. The new law ensured that only professors could be part of the council, prohibiting rectors or other members of the presidency to join. The members of the council are co-opted, making sure that no external organisation, including politics, can influence the decisions of ARACIS. By cutting all links with external influences, it ensured autonomy, but also risked losing its support from external stakeholder. However, by consulting relevant external stakeholders in the process of setting up of the agency as well in its pilot phase, it has effectively built its authority, showing that it would take the opinions of its beneficiaries seriously. To further set an example, it has invited students as observers to its council meetings even though it was not required to do so by law. In this regard, it manages to remain independent in the complex Romanian society, while keeping quite open relations with external actors.

Compliance With The European Standards and Guidelines

Introduction

ARACIS was created after the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines, which allowed it to use the ESG as the basis of its operations. Not surprisingly, the study visit team was pleased to find a deep knowledge and a publicly declared commitment for the implementation of the ESG. The team was challenged to create a better understanding over the benefits of ARACIS' interaction with the European environment, as the ESG have been its point of reference. Different stakeholders painted for us the following concrete benefits for the European perspective:

- Europe gives an opportunity for exposure to best practices in the field and eases access to internationally recognised experts;

- It makes the Romanian system compatible with foreign legal frameworks;

- As Europe is perceived to have a certain authority, using the ESG gives increased legitimacy in the national context;

- A permanent reference for its activity from an objective outside perspective.

In a larger context, the leadership of ARACIS believes that the close interaction between ARACIS and the European environment will contribute to an increase in credibility of the Romanian diplomas and an increase in the mobility of staff and students.

In this chapter, a detailed analysis of the performance of ARACIS on the ESG is made. The method of evaluation is based on a balance between detail and judgemental value. The team recognises it is unfair to conclude that the agency would not comply with a standard if considerable understanding of the ESG is shown. Therefore, a quality assurance agency can partially comply with the standards and guidelines. However, value of judgement can be lost when the compliance test becomes too vague. The study visit team believes that objectivity is best served by using a three level marking system.

- Compliance, where ARACIS implements the ESG in an effective manner;

- Partial compliance, where ARACIS' practices are based on the correct interpretation of the ESG, positive aspects have been identified, but the manner of implementation is not effective enough.

- No compliance, where ARACIS practices are based on misinterpretations of the ESG or where they are completely out of line;

Compliance with Part 2: European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education

Although only the third part of the ESG provide standards for quality assurance agencies, the study visit team considers that the second part contains important references that affect the work of the agency and over which the agency has considerable control. Moreover, the third part of the ESG holds a specific reference to the second part, making it interesting to evaluate the compliance of this part as well.

The standards and guidelines for external quality assurance are being used by quality assurance agencies as a common frame of reference for their procedures/activities. They cover both evaluation and accreditation of study programmes and institutions. The standards represent undisputed good practices all across Europe, but should not be translated directly or used solely as a checklist. A national agency is expected to develop its own policies that best serve the national interests of the higher education system, in compliance with the ESG.

2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

The "Quality Assurance Law" stipulates the obligation for each university to set up a system of quality assurance. Students participate in the management structure, but also act as a source of input. Each university is expected to have in place a quality assurance commission, policies and procedures and a database. ARACIS' self-evaluation report provides a critical assessment on the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes: "the formal policies and procedures and the database are far from being operational". Therefore, ARACIS has taken a pro-active stand in promoting internal quality assurance. Noteworthy is that standards and procedures for enhancing internal quality assurance are highlighted.

ARACIS' external evaluation is based on three pillars: institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management. The methodology includes a specific part reflecting the first part of the ESG, internal quality assurance.

The study visit team considers that the different pillars are not shown the same importance in the external evaluations, generating an imbalance in the reports. The overall internal quality assurance procedures are not reflected strongly enough in the final report. The team of evaluators (to be widely discussed under standard 2.4 Fitness for purposes) and the Romanian university culture with respect to internal quality assurance have a major contribution to this problem.

The study visit team considers that ARACIS needs to continue to promote internal quality assurance in a participative manner with a specific focus on creating ownership over it within its own structures, the higher education institutions and stakeholders. The first target can be the experts register, the external evaluators, who play a great role in the implementation of the policies of ARACIS at the university level and are the main interface between ARACIS and the higher

education system in Romania. Secondly, ARACIS needs to focus on the leadership of the universities, in order to increase their awareness of the important benefits a quality culture brings, and to empower them to transform quality assurance from a statement of intent to a reality in the classroom.

ARACIS complies with Standard 2.1.

2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

In the first year of its existence, ARACIS was governed an Interim Council, composed of representatives of rectors, the Senate of Romania and the Minister of Education, Research and Youth. Students participated as observers, without decision making powers. The aim of this initial phase was to develop ARACIS' mission and objectives, the methodology and guidelines. All the stakeholders involved have contributed through their representatives to the shape and content of future quality assurance processes. The process was participative with a vivid public debate. The guidelines were published both in Romanian and English and they are available on the web site.

ARACIS has clearly committed to further collect feedback for the pilot phase of institutional evaluation and to improve the methodology and the guidelines. A commission of experts is currently being formed to evaluate its methodology, including student representatives.

The study visit team advises ARACIS to ensure that the student perspective will be included in the improvement process, taking into account the lack of formal mechanisms of safeguarding their full participation in all the stages of quality assurance.

ARACIS complies with standard 2.2.

2.3 Criteria for decisions:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

The criteria used in external quality assurance activity are published in documents, and translated into guides for the site visit teams as well as the higher education institution under evaluation. These documents are available in print and also downloadable from ARACIS' website. However, as these documents are written in a technical style and often focus on procedures rather than content of the evaluation, the message of quality assurance sometimes gets lost.

The decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity are based on the methodology and the report. They are recorded and communicated to the evaluated university. Both

the decision and the report are published on the website afterwards.

The evaluations are carried by the site visit team, coordinated by a director. Because of the characteristics of the experts register (to be widely described within standard 2.4) the criteria are not being applied consistently .

The consistency in applying the same criteria is affected by three major shortcomings:
-   A diversity in understanding quality assurance amongst the external evaluators;
-   An inadequate understanding of peer review culture amongst the Romanian academia (including external evaluators), manifested in the lack of open criticism and the perception/ use of criticism in terms of spreading negative gossips and rumours/ adverse reaction to open criticism;
-   An over emphasis on the importance of previous academic performances. E.g. a well known professor is not being evaluated with the same strictness as an entry level assistant.

All these problems were identified in the self-evaluation report and by some of the interviewed representatives. The study visit team considers that ARACIS plays a great role in promoting the cultural shift from such traditional practices to openness, explicitly and equality.

It was brought to the attention of the study visit team that universities had difficulties to measure the indicator of employability; the indicator was modified in a way that it had lowered its impact on the accreditation process. The study visit team considers this practice an inconsistency in applying the same criteria throughout the process of evaluation.

The absence of a professional secretary in the study programme accreditation visits is another concern. The role of the secretary is further explained under the standard 3.4 compliance analysis.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 2.3.

2.4 Processes fit for purpose:

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

• Insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;

• The exercise of care in the selection of experts;

• The provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;

• The use of international experts;

• Participation of students;

• ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to

support the findings and conclusions reached;

• The use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;

• Recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

The purpose of ARACIS is to assure and improve the quality of the Romanian higher education system, in accordance with European principles. The link between Europe and the national level is established through the law on quality assurance, which states that if ARACIS does not become a member of the European Quality Assurance Register, its activities will be ceased. It was mentioned repeatedly that goal is to make Romanian diplomas trustworthy in Europe.

The activities undertaken by ARACIS are licensing (provisional authorization), initial authorization, the accreditation following initial licensing, and the quality assurance and improvement of accredited higher education programmes and institutions in Romania. ARACIS has developed one standard methodology for all these activities. The study visit team considers it to be inappropriate to use the same methodology both for quality assurance on the programme level and the institutional level; therefore recommends ARACIS to explore the opportunity of applying separate methodologies in the case of study programmes and institutional evaluation, taking into account the input on the subject from the relevant stakeholders.

ARACIS bases its judgement on performance indicators. As qualitative data is largely seen as subjective, the indicators are rather quantitative than qualitative. Some of the interviewed representatives considered this approach to sustain the wrong image of ARACIS as a controlling organisation, which it has inherited from its predecessor CNEAA. This assumption is strengthened by the existence of specific indicators that are designed to identify bad quality rather than promote high quality.

In its external quality assurance activities ARACIS relies on:

- The external evaluators who are voluntary registered in the ARACIS 'register of evaluators', which also includes international evaluators. Their number amounts to approximately 1450. Being a member of the register is based on the free will of the applicant; there is no formal mechanism of selection. The appointment to quality assurance missions is done randomly, taking into account the compliance with the Code of Ethics. However, we were told that the evaluators that do not perform at a certain level are tacitly removed from evaluation teams. The study visit team considers this implicit technique intransparent and open to abuse. A proper and transparent selection procedure should be installed;

- The student evaluators, who are nominated by the student unions upon request and amount to nearly 100 persons;

The study visit team noticed the disproportion in terms of numbers between the professor evaluators and student evaluators. ARACIS needs to seek for solutions in cooperation with the student unions for filling this gap. The disproportion does not limit to numbers, but has also extended to the day-to-day work of the experts. The study visit team was informed of cases in which student evaluators received the 1500 pages self evaluation report only the day before the actual site visit. The study

visit team considers that ARACIS should enforce working plans that ensure all evaluators are treated equally. Working plans should have a set of clear deadlines for:

- Sending the pre-visit documentation;

- Delivering the individual contributions to the report;

- Sending individual comments to the general report;

- Integrating the comments in the overall report.

The recommendations for the improvement of equality within the evaluators' panels are widely discussed in Part 3 – Student participation in Quality Assurance.

Another noteworthy feature was the predominance of old male academics in the register. The study visit team considers that diversity should be ensured in the evaluators body and recommends ARACIS to enforce policies of recruitment of female and young academics and of their integration in the panels.

ARACIS managed to run a project for the training of evaluators under MATRA funding. International trainers were also involved. But, only half of the external evaluators of ARACIS have been undergoing a training process. The leadership of ARACIS acknowledges that the quality of the evaluators is one of the biggest problems of fitness for purposes and is therefore launching another major training project in which around 600 experts will be trained. Unfortunately, at the moment of the evaluation a minimum understanding of quality assurance in higher education has not yet been met by the external evaluators, leading to inconsistencies in the application of the methodology.

Student evaluators do all receive training through the student organisations in cooperation with experts from amongst the ARACIS leadership. The level of knowledge of student evaluators was an outstanding positive experience for the study visit team.

The study visit team considers that joint training missions, with an audience composed by both academia and student evaluators would be a useful method of increasing of quality of and equality in the external evaluation panels.

The evaluation team meets only when the evaluation starts. The study visit identified cases when documents were not made available for evaluators well in advance. The effectiveness of briefing can be also improved.

International experts are being used in some of the evaluations. The study visit team would like to underline the value they add to the evaluation: an external perspective from a different culture can provide exciting and new ideas. The study visit team has found good practices, but also shortcomings such as using members of the academic Romanian Diaspora as international experts. The study visit team would like to encourage ARACIS in extending the best practices and to make the use of international experts a common practice.

During its short activity, ARACIS has managed to process nearly 2000 evaluation and accreditation requests. A major part of the workload represents accreditation. Of course, the huge demand in accreditation is correlated to the size of the Romanian higher education system and the reforms it currently faces. ARACIS had to find responses to the demands of the universities. The study visit

team would like to underline the fact that the accreditation direction of ARACIS was overburdened, although it acknowledges the efforts that were made. A question mark has been raised about the quality of the accreditation work in such conditions. The study visit team doubts if the accreditation body of ARACIS has been able to pay the necessary attention to the complexities of each study programme that was under scrutiny.

Most of the weak points were identified by ARACIS in the self evaluation report or in the interviews. The study visit team would like to congratulate ARACIS for the self critical approach and considers it important that the leadership of ARACIS will commit itself to continuous improvement, both externally, in the quality assurance processes, but also internally, to further develop itself.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 2.4.

2.5 Reporting:

Reports should be published and should be written in a style, which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

The institutional evaluation reports are being published in an accessible and open manner, both on the website of ARACIS and in print. There is a different procedure for study programme evaluations. The study programme evaluations are accessible, if one formally requests it, but not in a manner open to the wide public. The study visit team has identified the problem that recommendations are not always a major part, even though ARACIS leadership acknowledges the importance of improvement in quality assurance processes. Some of the interviewed representatives have pointed out that the template used for reporting does not contain appropriate space for analysis and recommendations, which favours the descriptive, quantitative approach.

The reporting process is complicated and indirect. The student, international evaluator, study programme and institutional panels submit an individual report. The mission director drafts the overall report. The report is submitted to a permanent commission related to the field of study of the study programme (or the permanent commission for institutional evaluation). The commission moderates the final draft report. The final draft report is then sent to the university for feedback and after this cycle has finally been completed, the Council makes a final decision.

The study visit team has identified the following problems arising from the reporting process:
- There is no professional staff involved in the secretarial activities of the quality assurance missions;
- The evaluators have no formal means to integrate their contributions into the overall report.
- different perspectives exist on the measure in which the overall report reflects the individual reports;
- The drafting of the overall report creates an imbalance of power between the director and the rest of the evaluators;
- There are no formal means to prevent the permanent commissions to introduce significant

changes to the final draft report, except writing to the Council.

The study visit team considers that the final report needs to be a balanced reflection of the perspectives of all evaluators, based on consensus. In order to achieve it, a reporting system should be designed in which all evaluators contribute and their contribution is awarded equal importance. Evaluators should strive to reach consensus. In cases where this is not possible, a dissenting opinion could be considered. For its effectiveness, this system needs to be accompanied with meetings of all evaluators, prior, during and post evaluation.

Another point of improvement should be the publishing of study programme reports on ARACIS' website, so they are easier accessible to the regular students and the wider public.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 2.5.

2.6 Follow-up procedures:

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

The methodology of ARACIS and the law on quality assurance provide the premises for ARACIS to enforce follow up procedures. In case of a conditional accreditation decision ARACIS and the university need to agree on a follow up plan, which is to be implemented by the university within the following year. ARACIS will assess the improvements of the university after one year.

The follow-up procedures are however not always used:
- In case of study programmes there is no follow-up procedure in power.
- Universities marked as having "high trust" are not subjected to follow up procedures.

The study visit team considers it necessary to develop clear follow up procedures for all types of evaluations. The team however recognises that the history of ARACIS has been too short to properly evaluate the consistency in applying follow up procedures.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 2.6.

2.7 Periodic reviews:

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

The law on quality assurance stipulates a cycle of five year in external quality assurance processes. ARACIS has made efforts to promote the first phase of institutional reviews as a pilot. They have

also committed to improve the methodology for the second cycle of reviews.

The study visit team considers the above-mentioned premises sufficient to ensure an adequate periodical review.

ARACIS complies with standard 2.7.

2.8 System-wide analyses:

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

The short history of ARACIS makes the production of a system wide analysis impossible. Yet, promising steps were taken in order to achieve it:

- Publishing an analysis entitled "101 spots", based on the input of the student unions,meant to reveal infringements in quality in Romanian Higher Education;

- There have been project proposals for a "higher education barometer" based on the evaluation of 45 universities in addition to the 11 contained in the pilot phase and a transversal survey of several academic subjects: law, IT, mechanical engineering and sociology.

The deadlines for such analyses are set for 2011.

ARACIS complies with standard 2.8.

Compliance with Part 3: European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies

The third part of the ESG are the basis for the audit of ARACIS, as they address quality assurance agencies directly. The standards and guidelines in this part are built on the mutual recognition by national quality assurance agencies of the basic methodology for quality assurance. They are not too detailed, nor too prescriptive, as they must not reduce the freedom of the agencies to reflect in their organisation and processes in their national context.

3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

The compliance with this standard is widely analysed in the previous part of the report.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 3.1.

3.2 Official status:

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

ARACIS is the only quality assurance agency operating in Romania. The right to operate for a higher education institution is awarded by the ministry of education, research and youth, following ARACIS' accreditation decisions.

The Parliament of Romania, through its specific commissions was actively involved in adjusting the Emergency Government Ordinance regulating quality assurance. The legal basis for ARACIS's existence and functioning is the Emergency Government Ordinance 75/12.07.2005, adjusted, completed and approved by the Romanian Parliament by Law No. 87/10.04.2006, "The Law on Quality Assurance in Education". ARACIS functions in compliance with the "Education Law", Law No. 84/1995 and the Constitution of Romania.

The responsibilities for external quality assurance are stipulated and strictly regulated in the above mentioned Laws, enforcing the actions of the agency and, in the same time reducing the dynamics of improvement driven from inside ARACIS forces. All changes regarding methodology and structures need to be voted upon by the Romanian Parliament with a two thirds majority.

ARACIS complies with standard 3.2.

3.3 Activities:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

ARACIS has clearly defined activities which are widely known and published. It undertakes temporary authorisation, study programme accreditation and institutional quality assurance and accreditation. The cycle of institutional external quality assurance is a maximum of five years. All new study programmes need to be authorised before being launched. One of the requirements within higher education in Romania is to accredit all study programmes until 2011.

In 2007, ARACIS ran a pilot phase of institutional external quality assurance. The methodology was tested on 11 universities on a voluntary basis.

ARACIS complies with standard 3.3.

3.4 Resources:

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective

and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

ARACIS has managed to ensure stabile and proper funding for its activities. The yearly budget for 2007 amounts to nearly € 4 million, which is an impressive figure for a young institution like ARACIS. The main expenditure is personnel (more than 60%). There are specific budget lines for strategic development and unforeseen expenses. A big achievement in terms of finances is the grant agreements ARACIS has managed to sign in order to fund major activities. The total money infusion will amount to 4.9 million EUR for the following 3 years.

In terms of human resources, ARACIS operates with three types of personnel:
-   The council is composed of 15 members and is responsible for the governance of ARACIS. It renews two thirds of its composition every three years using a procedure based on a national competition. Two students who are delegated by the Romanian unions of students participate as observers at the invitation of the council, raising the number of persons involved in the work of the Council to 17.
-   The professional staff is composed of 10 inspectors, who assist the directors of the accreditation department and the quality assurance department. At the time of the site-visit, there were four vacancies among the professional staff. They have executive responsibilities assigned by the Directors, being a link between the Departments, the evaluators and the universities. They are also doing the executive implementation of the projects subject of the grant agreements;
-   The technical staff is responsible for the administrative support of the organisation, such as finances and accountancy, public relations, IT and maintenance. An executive director and a financial director manage their activity.

The permanent staff of ARACIS totals 35 positions. The financial resources are adequate and proportional to enable them to run external quality assurance activities in an efficient and effective manner.

The team was positively impressed with the genuine motivation and dedication of the professional staff, which faced the problem of being overburdened. In this light, the need to recruit more staff (firstly to occupy the vacancies) was obvious. The Romanian institutions sized like ARACIS are obliged to provide or pay for their staff training courses. For the moment, the professional staff went only under basic English courses.

In spite of the abundance of financial resources, the human resource is not dimensioned for the size of the activity of ARACIS. If we count here the challenges ARACIS is facing because the culture of quality within higher education in Romania is not yet developed, the discrepancy is even more visible. ARACIS is lacking a proper policy of personnel, starting with advertising the job offers in the right media, and ending with an effective professionalisation and measures of retention inside the structure. Special focus should be laid on the empowerment of the PR department due to the importance of getting the message across.

Reacting to the reforms within Romanian society, sometimes leading the debate on reforms requires innovation and vision from ARACIS. This is one of the reasons why project based funding is so

compatible with ARACIS activity. ARACIS is shaped like an organisation where research is one of the vital functions. The study visit team considers that ARACIS needs to include in its activity research work carried out by professionals, such as impact assessments, system analyses, drafting policies and offering consultancy to the Council.

Another opportunity that should be considered is the creation of a pool of secretaries who participate in the site visit and assist the panel by ensuring the methodology is being respected, drafting reports and arranging practicalities.

The study visit team has found the following non-traditional resources that play an important role in the activity of ARACIS:
- The public and academic standing of key people involved in ARACIS empowers the authority and forms a key resource;
- The corporate image built on credibility of the persons involved in ARACIS. The study visit team considers it important to improve the image of ARACIS by paying more attention to design and layout and increasing visibility, in accordance with the ambitious mission it has set for itself.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 3.4.

3.5 Mission statement:
Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

The mission statement of ARACIS is available both in a printed and electronic format. The text is clear for the audience.

However, the importance of details in the procedures sometimes overshadows the mission statement, leaving the overall impression of an instrumental organisation. Some stakeholders expressed the opinion that ARACIS is sometimes still perceived more like a control body rather than a quality assurance body (mainly due to CNEAA heritage and to the culture of quality before 1989).

The study visit team considers that ARACIS needs to undertake measures that all individuals involved will create an ownership over its mission and project the accurate image of the agency.

ARACIS complies with standard 3.5.

3.6 Independence:
Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

The legal basis founding ARACIS ensures sufficient provisions for its independence. It is an autonomous public institution of national interest.

The regular change of membership of the council creates a healthy system of a regular change in leadership, limiting the dependence on former leaders. The membership of the interim council was balanced between nominees from the ministry of education research and youth, the Senate of Romania and the rectors. Membership in the council is obtained through a nationwide, competitive process, on the basis of voluntary applications from interested individuals. Every three years two-thirds of the members of the council have to step down. Rectors and elected national public representatives are not allowed to apply. An ad hoc committee coordinates the process. The components of the committee are proposed jointly by the national academy and the national council of rectors, containing also the existing council members remaining in position at the end of the term.

The council decides upon procedures and regulations based on the law on quality assurance. It decides about contracting and accreditation or external quality assurance mission. Professor evaluators in the register of experts are appointed and dismissed only by the council. The student unions nominate the student evaluators. The council also approves and adopts the final reports of evaluations.

In the case of authorisation of new study programmes, it is the responsibility of the Minister of Education, Research and Youth to submit a list of degrees to the Parliament which decides whether they are allowed to start. The Parliament adopts a specific law for this type of authorisation. There have so far been no reports of cases of interference by the Minister or the Parliament into the list of programmes that ARACIS drafted. The study visit team interprets this practice as a harmless formality.

Under extraordinary circumstances, the Minister of Education, Research and Youth can ask ARACIS to evaluate a specific university. The relationship between the two bodies is regulated through a contract.

ARACIS has diverse sources of income, composed of evaluation fees, bank interests, differences in exchange rates and grants, guaranteeing the financial independence of the institutions.

By law, the ministry of education, research and youth should provide ARACIS with an office and space for its archives. This obligation is not fulfilled by the ministry, but the university of Bucharest gives ARACIS a discount on its rent. ARACIS pays for the facilities it uses, the rent being part of the budget. However, this slight inconvenience does not jeopardise the balance of the annual budget.

ARACIS is functionally, politically and financially independent from all stakeholders in higher education. The study visit team would like to point out in the end that excessive independence might lead to isolation and suggests that ARACIS and its partners explore also other models of independence, in which it has formal relations with its stakeholders, while keeping independence.

ARACIS complies with standard 3.6.

3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

• A self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;

• an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;

• Publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;

• A follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

These procedures are described in detail in part two of the ESG above. The procedures are in place and are publicly available in the published ARACIS methodology and the subsequent guides for higher education institutions and evaluators. Writing and submitting a self-evaluation report is one of the pre-requisites for conducting an external evaluation. There were complaints on the complexity of the self-evaluation report and on the excessive focus on description, rather than being analytical and self-critical. The study visit team considers it necessary to improve the drafting of self-evaluation reports with regards to qualitative aspects.

ARACIS decides on the details of the visit and includes at least one student evaluator in case of an institutional evaluation. In the case of evaluations of study programmes, no student participates in the evaluation process. The study visit considers it essential to include students in these evaluations, as they can very well judge issues such as pedagogies, workload, the attractiveness of the curricula and support materials, the relevance for the labour market, the relation between different courses. The study visit team considers that student evaluators, who underwent a training programme can successfully take part in these evaluation teams and can bring a specific and valuable contribution to the evaluation.

The agency uses a system of three marks for its judgements (high trust, limited trust and no trust) and it is foreseen that another marking will be introduced (trust with a plan of measures). If one university feels that the judgement of ARACIS does not reflect the reality within the institution, an appeal system can be used. In case of institutional evaluation, the final report is published in printed and electronic version. It includes a specific part for recommendations, but the study visit team considers that the reports can be more critical in their recommendations. In case of study programme evaluation, the report is not published. It can be accessed at the office of ARACIS based on a formal request.

A follow up procedure exists only if the higher education institution is not marked with high trust. In such cases its leadership is required to submit an improvement plan, based on the recommendation of the report. ARACIS checks if the plan of improvement was implemented correctly after one year. The study visit team considers that universities that are awarded high trust could use the reports to their benefits as well, by establishing groups of experts, including student representatives that will draft action plans and monitor implementation based on the evaluation. A report containing critical recommendations can thus be a powerful base and a reference for the

improvement process.

ARACIS complies partially with standard 3.7.

3.8 Accountability procedures:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

ARACIS has many strong procedures in place to ensure its accountability.

ARACIS operates under Romanian Law, so it can be legally tried. ARACIS has inherited seven legal trials from CNEAA. The "Law of transparency and access to public information" offers the possibility of every citizen of Romania to ask for information of public interest. Basically, all work of ARACIS is of public interest.

The evaluated universities can use an appeal system in case they accuse vices of procedure or results. An ethics commission has been formed within the council, which bases its activity on a code of ethics. The main role of the ethics commission is to solve any internal conflicts of interest in the experts register. Also, a financial audit is performed by an internationally authorised auditor on a yearly basis.

The legal basis of ARACIS provides the provision for a mandatory external review of ARACIS on a regular basis. The team positively appreciates the steps taken in that direction. Firstly, the ARACIS has gone under an external independent evaluation performed by personalities that have inspired Romanian quality assurance system. The report was made available to the wide public and has been widely debated. At the present time, ARACIS is undergoing evaluations by both ESU and EUA, which are also intended to lead to public reports.

ARACIS could however develop clearer feedback loops with stakeholders, both internally (staff, evaluators) and externally (evaluated universities, the ministry of education, research and youth, the rectors conference and student organisations).

ARACIS complies with standard 3.8.

Conclusion

The study visit team would like to congratulate ARACIS for having made important achievements in such a short period of activity. It is clear that ARACIS has a fairly good understanding of the ESG and has come far in complying with them. Especially on the following aspects, it has reached outstanding results:
- Independence in a complex and turbulent environment;
- A strong legal basis;
- The processes designed in line with the European concepts.

The study visit team has made some considerations and recommendations for all standards, even for those with which ARACIS complies. It believes that such an approach triggers debates leading to continuous improvement, which is the core mission of quality assurance.

However, there are aspects on which ARACIS needs to improve considerably. The biggest challenge is making its plans a reality - accurately implementing a system which has been designed correctly. The core issues for improvement are its fitness for purposes (standard 2.4) and reporting (standard 2.5).

Note worthy is the fact that a red thread runs through the most of the issues of concern, gravitating around the problems with the fitness for purposes of its approach. The study visit team considers that once ARACIS will achieve compliance under this aspect, it will generate a domino effect, making the compliance with the rest of the standards much easier.

Student Participation in ARACIS

Introduction

As the third aspect of the evaluation, the team has taken a close look at student participation in ARACIS and its activities. The role of students in quality assurance is increasing and has been established as a core principle of quality assurance in the ESG. In Romania however, the involvement of students is relatively new, as CNEAA never involved students in either its council or its evaluations. Before assessing the participation of students in ARACIS itself, it makes sense to look back into some of the fundamental reasons for involving students in quality assurance.

Firstly, society and the labour market are rapidly changing in a global environment. Students are more than ever aware of the pressure on them, develop their own ideas about their future and are more articulated in voicing what they need. This concept is reflected in the new (Bologna-) paradigm of learning, which is heavily student-centred. Such a system needs to listen to the voices of the actors inside it in order to continuously adapt to the changing environment. Needless to say, this works both ways: involving students also provides momentum towards this new system of learning.

Secondly, students have a fundamental interest in being involved in discussions about the quality of education. As the quality of their education not only affects their academic careers, but to a high degree determines their future lives, it is only fair that they have a strong say in accreditation and quality improvement. Furthermore, as the concept of quality is highly debatable in itself, it is important to involve students, who have a unique understanding of it.

Thirdly, the process of quality assurance is more effective if students are involved. Not only will they feel ownership over the process, but students also have a valuable contribution to make to the discussions about quality. As they are roaming from classroom to classroom, they are easily able to compare one teacher or a course to another, have argumented opinions and give comprehensive suggestions accordingly. They are often the best in evaluating teaching quality, pedagogies, the

relation between different courses, workload, the learning outcomes and whether a course is challenging enough or not.

Finally, the actors involved in quality assurance processes learn a lot from their activities. The competences associated with evaluations are a clear understanding of the concept of quality, of doing evaluation and giving feedback. By involving students in the many evaluations, we are supporting a generation that is educated to be both critical and constructive.

Based on these reasons, the team concludes that students should be involved at all levels, and as equal partners to staff (teachers, professors, administration) and the leadership of higher education institutions. The following observations are made from that background.

Observations

ARACIS is contributing to the improvement of student involvement in quality processes as well as in the wider higher education system. This role is recognised by the leadership of ARACIS as needed for the relatively traditional higher education sector. The team has found that especially from a historical perspective, ARACIS has managed to improve student participation substantially, although still much can be done to make students an equal partner in all its operations.

An overview over where in the hierarchy and in which activities students are participating is not available, so we will try to give an overview in this report. Two students were part of the interim council that prepared the methodology of ARACIS and the legislation that was adopted in the Parliament. In the legislation, students became a member of the institutional evaluation teams. However, they are not members of the site-visit teams for programme accreditation, not members of the permanent expert commissions that adopt the reports, not member of the team that authorises new study programme and the Parliament removed them from the council in the final legislation (despite lobbying efforts from the Minister, the student unions and the ARACIS leadership). It is positively noted that ARACIS moves beyond the law and invites the students to the meetings of the council as observers who can freely speak. Furthermore, students are taking part in some of ARACIS' projects such as improving the methodology for external evaluation and the international project on quality assurance of student assessment.

A big concern is the separation of students from the other experts in the evaluations. Where students are involved, they still feel that they are not fully part of what is happening. Students and teachers are separately trained to gain competences in quality assurance. Students also prepare for the site-visits separately from the teachers. Therefore, they often feel that they are not seen and treated equally by the other members of the team. If they want to express their opinion, then they usually feel that they have to write a separate report. Although being able to write a separate report in order to get the message across was initially requested as by the student unions themselves, they now feel that this has led to a further disintegration of their work.

For a large part, this situation reflects the perception of the wider Romanian higher education community in which students are not yet seen as an equal partner. In that respect, ARACIS is improving the understanding of the role of students and for that reason acts as an important role model.

The student unions have been pro-active in improving student participation in quality assurance by training their members, learning about the issue in a European context and developing policies to improve quality assurance in Romania. It is clear to the study visit team that students are ready to be involved on more levels and on a more equal footing. In particular, they have also shown to be reflective over their own role and are willing to 'assure the quality' of their own involvement.

Recommendations

The study visit team has developed a list of recommendations to ARACIS and the other actors in Romanian higher education to improve the participation of students in quality assurance. The recommendations can generally be summarised into two main points:

1. Introducing a formal status of students in ARACIS's bodies as equal partners
2. Enabling full and equal participation in practice

The study visit team considers that the recommendations can contribute to the debate about quality assurance, as agreed upon in the terms of reference. It also considered that, in spite of the publicly declared willingness of ARACIS and the efforts paid to improve student involvement in quality assurance, the solution accepted by all the relevant stakeholder, was not at the reach of ARACIS for the moment. The context of Romanian society, specially the culture of quality, is influencing heavily this situation.

The study visit team encourages ARACIS to produce a set of gradual measures to improve the situation regarding student participation, in consultation with the stakeholders and using the input from the external evaluations they have been undergoing.

We therefore recommend to:
- Introduce students' evaluators in the provisional authorisation of study programmes and accreditation processes of already existing study programs. As the study programme is often the connecting point between the student and higher education, students have a good judgement of these programmes. Student unions are enthusiastic to participate in these reviews and provide trained experts, giving momentum for their inclusion.
- Improve the number of students as evaluators in quality assurance evaluations, so that students are represented proportionally in any site-visit team.
- Create the same remuneration system for students and other experts, in order to make them an equal member of the teams.
- Empower (students') evaluators on quality assurance of HEIs. This approach stimulates common understanding of standards and guidelines by all evaluators and facilitates trust. It is also recommended that student unions besides a joint training continue with organizing trainings for students' evaluators which is especially focussing to students needs.
- Hold joint training sessions for student and professor evaluators. Such training sessions would help to develop an environment of trust, cooperation among evaluators and especially to achieve a common understanding of the methodology.

   It would be useful to address the following issues during the trainings:

- successful cooperation between professor and student evaluators
- understanding the role of student involvement in higher education
- how to evaluate student participation at different levels of HEIs
- how to evaluate the effectiveness of learning processes and how to approach these when writing recommendations.

- Introduce students as full and equal members of the ARACIS Council and other relevant bodies of ARACIS. The law should recognise that students are an equal partner, in order to fully include them on the highest level. This would create a strong ownership over and support for the process of quality assurance as well as further promote the idea of students as equal partners.

- Enable meetings of evaluation team prior to the site visit in which evaluators can jointly reflect on the self evaluation report and material presented by the higher education institution undergoing evaluation. This would allow the team to prepare jointly and keep everyone on equal footing.

- Plan the timing of a site-visit as practically as possible so that students can more easily participate. It is advisable that evaluations take place in a period in which there are no exams. In cases where this is not possible, students should be allowed certain flexibility in their exams by their higher education institution.

- Establish a common practice that only one joint report is delivered by the actors involved in a site-visit. This would encourage the idea of consensus within the study visit team about the final product of the visit. In case a member of the team disagrees with the final report, a dissenting opinion could be added to it, in order to stimulate an inclusive process.

- Allow the site-visit team to jointly discuss and reflect upon their observations after visiting the higher education institution and jointly prepare the final report. This activity is important for all evaluators to achieve a common understanding of the quality of the institution, to give clearer and stronger suggestions to the higher education institution about improvement and create a joint ownership over the report.

- Encourage higher education institutions to write a joint self evaluation report in a team that includes stakeholders with a focus to prepare a SWOT (or comparable) analysis rather than each stakeholder preparing their individual report containing mostly quantitative indicators. The preparation of the self evaluation report at the institution can thus become a learning experience and can greatly improve the common understanding of the quality culture among stakeholders, enabling common grounds for searching and implementing solutions.

- Encourage the higher education institution to follow up the evaluation with a group of experts including all stakeholders which will reflect upon the recommendations and further develop an improvement plan.

- Aid student organisations financially as well as with material goods in order to support activities such as trainings for student evaluators or promotion projects for the pool of student evaluators.

Conclusions

The leadership of ARACIS is clearly motivated to improve student participation and recognises it as a fundamental principle of modern quality assurance. The understanding of the realities of students can be improved and their participation can still be greatly expanded. As already argued above, one of ARACIS' core challenges is to shift the paradigm around quality assurance from a focus on quantitative indicators to an approach of continuous quality improvement. A broader shift or

paradigm towards a student-centred higher education system is however needed as well, as promoted by the Bologna Process. This requires that students are seen as equal partners in all decisions regarding higher education, which is far from being a reality. Changing these paradigms takes time and efforts by leading organisations such as ARACIS, but will pay off in a better and modern higher education system.

Final Considerations

ARACIS moving forward in a European context

From the very founding of ARACIS, the European dimension has clearly played an important role for the organisation. Drawing on European institutions and documents as a source of expertise and authority, ARACIS has been able to establish itself as a strong actor in the Romanian higher education sector. The consecutive reviews that are being undertaken by European organisations continue to bring European perspectives into Romania. In the future, ARACIS could consider sending broader body of staff and experts (not only the key positions) to European discussions, in order to expose a larger number of people to 'what is going on'. This could stimulate ARACIS to be more critical towards European perspectives before adopting them and thus improve its own quality assurance practices as well as the European discussions themselves.

Trust and internalising the culture of quality

While ARACIS has done a lot of work to promote the concept of a 'quality culture', including its participation in a number of international projects, much remains to be done in this field. The Romanian higher education sector does not have a long tradition in self-evaluation, open debates and self-improvement. A big problem indeed is the lack of trust in the institutions that are supposed to deliver high quality. The strong focus on procedures, quantitative indicators and details is still present, which leads the away from doing quality assurance in the context of improvement. A danger for the development of a quality culture is the quick development of rankings in Romania, which are an expression of quantitative indicators rather than concepts related to quality assurance. If the ranking approach takes over from quality assurance, it typically leads to a decrease in trust and a competition on arbitrary indicators. Another important point is that quality assurance has to become important for all higher education institutions, including the ones that have scored high in the accreditation process: even the best institutions can improve (which rankings hardly recognise). ARACIS could for example project that its standards will progressively rise if quality assurance is taken seriously in higher education institutions. ARACIS should therefore continue its efforts to promote a quality culture and improve its communication about this topic to the wider public.

Academic community and external stakeholders

A positive development that aids quality assurance is the creation of a stakeholder configuration that feels a certain ownership over the higher education discussions. Students, institutional leadership and staff (what is generally referred to as the academic community) have all shown a high degree of understanding of the main challenges facing higher education today. Actors outside higher education, such as employers or alumni, have also shown an interest in what is going on and have interesting comments to make. Internal and external actors however differ from each other in the interest they show in higher education and their dependence on improving higher education on a day-to-day basis. In the future, ARACIS will therefore be challenged to define what it considers its core and legitimate partners. It is advised that ARACIS develops formal links with the partners, while engaging with others on a more informal basis.

Changing paradigm in higher education

The main challenge for higher education in Europe, and particularly in Romania, is the shift towards a more student-centred approach. The huge challenge lies in transforming it into a reality in Romanian higher education. This is the core of Bologna Process reforms such as the shift to learning outcomes and the development of qualifications frameworks which continue to need a lot of attention. Key concepts are student participation, mobility and guidance, on which little policies exist. These policies will be implemented quicker if important organisations such as ARACIS take the lead. If students become an equal partner in its decision making and operating procedures, if arrogance and elitism in the academic world is countered and students will feel that their issues are taken seriously, higher education itself will more quickly reform itself according to the new paradigm of higher education.

Programme and/or institutional quality assurance and accreditation

ARACIS performs accreditation of both programmes and higher education institutions. Some actors have expressed the need for ARACIS to gradually move away from programme accreditation into either domain accreditation or by gradually stopping it entirely. Money and the amount of bureaucracy are identified as the biggest problems in programme accreditation. The effect of abolishing study programme accreditation on students could however be substantial. The study programme level is usually the connecting point between the higher education institution and students, making it an important reference of quality from a student's perspective. Also, a number of programmes did not receive accreditation indicating that problems do exist. While this reference point might slowly vanish in a study environment in which students have considerable more free choices, it would be recommended to make an impact assessment on students before taking a strategic choice in this area.

Conclusion

This report has tried to give a comprehensive overview over the performance of ARACIS from a students' perspective. From this angle, the evaluators have been able to take a critical viewpoint, leading to some interesting challenges for ARACIS. We hope that the conclusions from the report can be debated by the Romanian public and used in an improvement plan that will see student participation as one of its major challenges. The students of Romania depend on ARACIS to make higher education face their needs now and in the future.