

**ROMANIAN AGENCY FOR QUALITY
ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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ARACIS

Self-Evaluation Report: 2007-2008

December 2007

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Introduction

This self-evaluation report is part of a wider process of quality improvement, including the internal and external evaluation, of the activities of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The process was initiated at the end of 2006 by inviting a Monitoring Committee, composed of independent Romanian experts hired in their personal capacities, to monitor and advise the Council of ARACIS on ways of improving its roles, functions and activities in order to better respond to the demands and expectations of Romanian higher education institutions. The Commission's monitoring report was finalized in September 2007 (see Annex 1). The Report was widely debated by the ARACIS Council together with some stakeholders. It was then converted into a "policy matrix" of ARACIS (see Annex 2) for the coming period of activities, thus taking into account its recommendations and aiming for the improvement of the quality of services provided by ARACIS. The external evaluation process, domestically undertaken, has been further evolving by inviting the European University Association (EUA) to undertake an **international** external evaluation of the Agency. The EUA accepted the invitation and, in order to meet the requirements of an international external evaluation, ARACIS has elaborated this self-evaluation report based on a comprehensive pool of information that resulted from its own activities, as well as from the in-country external evaluations and consultations with various stakeholders. The self-evaluation report has been debated by the ARACIS Council, which adopted it and entrusted the President of

the ARACIS Council to forward it to the EUA for documenting the external evaluation of ARACIS.

The self-evaluation report is structured in three parts.

In the first part, the Agency's roles and functions are presented in the contexts of both the history of quality assurance and accreditation and the developments of higher education in Romania. In the second part, the ARACIS functions are analyzed with reference to European standards and guidelines. Finally, a summary of ARACIS issues of concern and of the self-perceived challenges are presented.

It is important to once again underline that the ARACIS Council considers the whole process of internal and external evaluation as a learning exercise which is expected to contribute to the further improvement of both the institutional capacities of ARACIS and the services provided to Romanian higher education institutions within the emerging European Higher Education Area.

Part I: ARACIS in context

Assuming that both outcomes and expectations are context-dependent, a presentation of the developments in the Romanian system of quality assurance and accreditation and in the system of higher education may help provide a clearer understanding of some of the options and challenges facing ARACIS today.

I.1. ARACIS and its legal base

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is known by the Romanian acronym ARACIS which stands for *Agenția Română pentru Asigurarea Calității în Învățământul Superior*. It started to function in 2005, being instituted by the legal provisions of the **Government Urgency Ordinance no. 75/2005 Regarding Quality Assurance in Education**. In 2006 some provisions of the **Ordinance** were modified by the Parliament and the Ordinance was finally adopted by the Parliament and it became a **Law** (see Annex 3). The **Law** (as it is hereafter referred to in the text) has provisions regarding quality assurance in education as a whole, while also referring specifically to quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. As the **Law** was adopted later than the ministers responsible for higher education from the Bologna countries adopted the **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area** (Bergen, 2005), its legal provisions either include or thoroughly comply with the principles and standards which currently have European currency. In what follows, references to the existing legal provisions of the **Law** and to their historical roots are made in order to outline some contextual legal and historical dimensions of the current activities of ARACIS.

1. First and foremost, quality assurance is expected to focus on learning outcomes. Art. 7 of the **Law** specifically mentions that “quality assurance in education is primarily focused on learning outcomes” which are expressed in terms of “knowledge, competences, values and attitudes that result from a student participating in and finalizing a level of education

or a study program”. This provision is all the more important since it has generated a shift of emphasis and approach in quality assurance and accreditation procedures and mechanisms, from the previous focus on educational inputs, to one on learning outcomes. As processes have evolved since the adoption of the **Law**, this shift has proved to be more difficult than expected. This is mostly due to the history of quality assurance and accreditation in Romania and to the ways in which higher education evolved.

At the beginning of the 1990s a mushrooming of private initiatives in establishing educational institutions took place in a legal vacuum. During the period from 1990 to 1992 more than ten private higher education institutions were established following from the provisions of a state decree at the beginning of the post-communist period that allowed for the establishment of private commercial companies. New academic entrepreneurs considered that higher education services could also be subject to trade in an emerging market where the demand for higher education was indeed very high. Establishing a commercial company for providing the demanded services was considered by such entrepreneurs as an acceptable market response. However, most of the academics and indeed the public at large were uneasy with educational institutions functioning as commercial companies. But the demand for higher education far exceeded the enrollment capacities of the then existing state universities, which were also quite inertial in changing to the newly emerging economic environment. Private institutions took advantage of this situation and relied heavily on those academics of state universities who were confronted with the effects of high inflation rates and low public salaries. The key concerns of the private educational entrepreneurs of the time were to secure basic

premises for providing teaching facilities and to charge enrollment fees which would yield a private profit. It was under such circumstances that public pressure for providing, and indeed assuring and improving the basic institutional infrastructure necessary for an institution of higher learning were increasing. Having the support of the World Bank, which at the time prepared the background for a loan addressing higher education, the public authorities drafted a law on accreditation of higher education institutions and on credential recognition. This Law was adopted in 1993 and empowered a National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA was its Romanian acronym) to provisionally authorize (license) and then accredit higher education institutions. Almost all standards considered in the processes were of an input type (e.g. teaching staff, teaching space, teaching facilities, library, curriculum design, etc.) and they were formulated in quantitative terms (e.g. how many teaching staff for how many students? how many volumes in the library? how many hours of contact teaching per week? what teaching load per staff member? etc.). Initially private higher education institutions (HEIs) reacted with a strong reluctance to the enforced legal provisions of 1993, accusing the public authorities of trying to prevent private initiatives and academic entrepreneurs for ideological reasons. They subsequently discovered various ways of complying with the input standards and over about a ten year period 27 private (see Annex 4) and 2 public HEIs were accredited .

A culture of superficial compliance with input standards that constantly ignored institutional **processes** of producing more and more graduates, and that widely postponed the concerns that regarded learning outcomes, has thus emerged and has become strongly

rooted in the system and institutions of higher education. This culture of inputs compliance is still operational today and therefore demands further exploration. It has evolved for more than a decade and during a period of major transformations in higher education. Institutional diversification on the public/private axis was associated with a multiplication of study programs and “specializations” in the fields of science, which competed for their being as narrowly oriented as widely diversified. In addition, the authorities of almost every major city around the country wanted to have a public “university” and were accompanied by a private higher education institution. The debate on university autonomy, a sensitive issue in a post-communist society, brought also to the fore the idea that any “external” interference, including anything related to quality assurance and accreditation, is an attempt to infringe on and limit institutional autonomy. The CNEAA resisted such pressures, due also to the support of the Parliament under the auspices of which CNEAA functioned at the time. But most of all, it was the culture of compliance with the demands of inputs standards and indicators that led to very high rates of licensing (authorization) and accreditation of study programs and institutions (then universities). Very few applications were turned down (less than 5 per cent), since any academic entrepreneur increased the number of students (in a context of high demand for higher education), by keeping tuition fees low, thus increasing access, and invested only in teaching staff salaries with little concern for important learning facilities. During the 1990s, most teaching space was hired at cheap rates, existing public libraries were also used as higher education libraries, and laboratory equipment or research equipment were either not procured or were not particularly necessary for such studies in the fields of law, economics or other social sciences and humanities which were the most dominant

at the time. The key learning outcome of the study programs was that of a cognitive reproduction.

The new **Law** of 2005 was drafted in order to dramatically change this well embedded paradigm of higher education expansion. It is not therefore surprising then that the process of implementing the provisions of this new **Law** has encountered strong resistance. On the one hand, more than 100 study programs, which were licensed (provisionally authorized) by applying the former input standards and criteria, had to be accredited by ARACIS because they did not manage to do so during the CNEAA functioning. Having originally been designed to comply with the inputs specifications under CNEAA, they suddenly had to comply with the new approaches put in place by the new **Law**. The resistance of the initiators of such study programs came naturally and they began lobbying the authorities. For almost a full year, the implementation of the new **Law** was blocked by procedural mechanisms. Thus, on the other hand, a contradiction between the old and the new approaches was strongly advocated by both the opponents and the promoters of the new **Law**. The promoters took the stand that whilst input standards and indicators are important, what counts most are the processes of activating them for generating those learning outcomes and competences that are specific to a particular qualification. Hence, the need is to focus on learning outcomes that is, on those results of the academic processes that are managed and quality assured institutionally in a university. The opponents of this approach adopted implicitly or explicitly the view that, when evaluating the inputs that are qualitatively assured, one automatically infers quality in the achieved learning outcomes. This contradiction is still at work today and it is

reflected by some of the performance indicators that are proposed in the ARACIS Methodology and by the ways the culture of compliance operates in the system of quality assurance. We refer later to some of the details of such issues.

2. The shift in quality assurance procedures provided by the new **Law** in 2005 is also of a holistic type. That is, the **Law** covers comprehensively all levels of education. Previously, many academics complained that the quality of education in primary and mainly in secondary education is so low that it is hard for them to achieve a high standard of higher education. The complaint went further by saying that too much time was being invested in remedial foundation programs to bring students up to a level appropriate for success at higher education. The option of the Law was to prevent such a view from being further supported. In order to have a unitary and comprehensive approach to quality, the **Law** provides for a general framework that is valid for both pre-university and university education. Two agencies will correspond to the two basic levels of education and they are expected to closely co-operate, and indeed they do so by exchanging information and working together on methodologies that are complementary. The overall approach to quality assurance is based on the same mechanisms and general standards, a focus on learning outcomes, and the national qualifications framework (which will soon be widely available), will provide the hierarchy of qualifications and illustrate progressive learning paths. ARACIS may thus focus on quality assurance in higher education while also taking into consideration developments that are outlined by ARACIP, the Romanian agency responsible for quality assurance in the pre-university education.

3. The **Law** describes the distinction and complementarities of quality assurance and accreditation. The overarching framework is that of quality assurance, in so far as the procedures and standards refer basically to the ways quality is assured in a study program and/or in a HEI. Accreditation is considered part of the procedure of quality assurance which follows from provisional authorization in order to progressively assure compliance with the minimum demands of quality enhancement. While both **new** study programs and **new** HEIs can be accredited when they meet the minimum quality standards, already accredited HEIs should have in place specific processes of quality assurance in order to demonstrate: (a) *institutional capacity* for organizing and providing higher education services; (b) *educational effectiveness* in mobilizing the necessary resources for generating appropriate learning outcomes; and (c) *quality management* within the institution (Art. 10 of the **Law**). The implication is twofold. On the one hand, only newly initiated HEIs and/or study programs are subject to provisional authorization and accreditation. On the other hand, the already accredited HEIs are subject to: (a) their own quality management and enhancement mechanisms and structures; (b) a periodical (every 5 years) external evaluation of quality. When an accredited HEI is not able to demonstrate that its activities correspond to the minimum standards and performance indicators, as outlined in the **Law**, that institution is granted a period of one year to bring about the necessary and expected corrections. If that HEI does not embark on bringing about the necessary improvements, ARACS formulates a proposal to suspend the accreditation and forwards it to the Ministry of Education for follow up. If necessary, the

Government would propose to the Parliament that the university be forced to cease functioning by adopting a corresponding law on this issue.

4. By considering the provisions of the **Law**, particularly those referring to Quality standards and performance indicators, as well as to the internal and external evaluation, ARACIS expected to elaborate a *Methodology of quality assurance in higher education* to be adopted by the Government. The first *Methodology* that followed on the new legal provisions was enforced in 2006 and was subject to a process of experimentation in 11 accredited universities. Ten universities were nominated by the Minister of Education, Research and Youth from a pool of 24 which voluntarily accepted to be part of the piloting process and one state university asked and covered the evaluation costs from its own external revenues. The monitoring report mentioned above (Annex 1) focused widely on the process of piloting the *Methodology* and led to the drafting of a new *Methodology* (Annex 5). The *Methodology* is complementary with a series of *Guides* (Annex 6) for users (e.g. self-evaluation, external evaluation etc.) in order to facilitate their work and establish complementarities between the ARACIS approach and that of HEIs. There are, *inter alia*, two issues of specific interest addressed in the *Methodology*: one referring to quality standards and the other to an institutional quality culture. Let us consider the former.

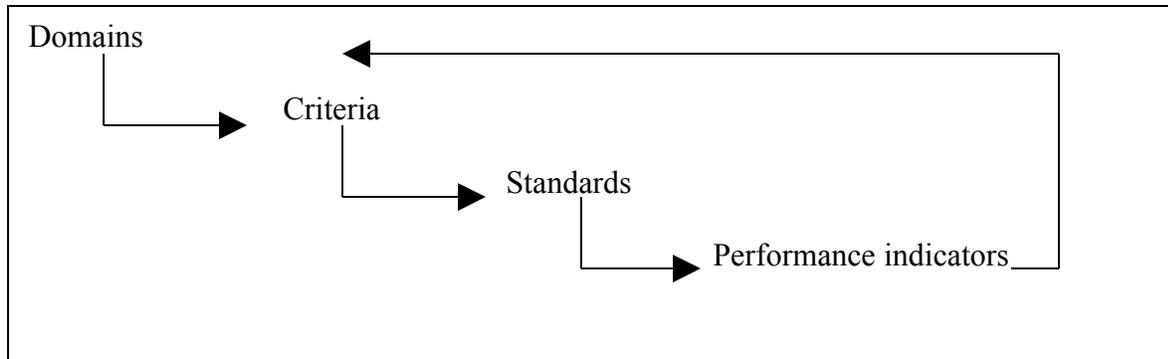
The **Law** identifies (Art. 10) the domains and criteria of quality assurance as follows:

Table 1: Domains and criteria of quality assurance

Domains	Criteria
A. Institutional capacity	(a) Managerial, administrative and institutional structures (b) Material basis (c) Human resources
B. Educational effectiveness	(a) Contents of study programs (b) Learning outcomes (c) Research activities (d) Financial activities
C. Quality management	(a) Strategies and procedures of quality assurance (b) Procedures for initiating, monitoring and reviewing programs (c) Objective and transparent procedures of assessing learning outcomes (d) Procedures for periodical assessment of faculty's quality (e) Accessibility of learning resources (f) Database on internal quality assurance (g) Transparency of information on institution (h) Functioning structures of quality assurance

Each criterion of a domain corresponds to a set of standards, and to each standard a set of performance indicators. While standards are statements which are meant to make operational a given criterion, a set of performance indicators corresponds to each standard. The

Fig 1. Sequencing of references for quality assurance



Performance indicators are so formulated as to allow HEIs to know what is the minimum quality requirement that is expected in that particular domain and also to project higher outcomes and performance beyond that level. The sequencing of references for QA is also defined in such a way as to provide a framework for institutionally developing a culture of evidence based quality. This culture of evidence is expected to include a database that would be structured along the above outlined sequencing (Fig. 1) as well as additional documents regarding an institutional policy of quality assurance. Such a database and the additional documents would increase the transparency of information for students and also for the public and would provide witness to quality enhancement in the HEI. They may also eliminate the need for unnecessarily long reports on institutional quality assurance and allow for substantive internal debates and self-evaluation reports.

5. The development of an institutional quality culture is a key provision of the **Law**. A hot debate is currently under way in this regard and two approaches have so far emerged. One approach considers that the sequencing of references (Fig. 1), and

particularly the performance indicators, provides opportunities for the bureaucratization of QA. The other approach emphasizes the need for developing institutionally a culture of evidence with regard to quality and thus for accurately informing stakeholders on the state of quality. The key issue of the debate refers to the gap or to the link between the institutional structures in charge of quality and the institutional practices and values that correspond to them. The two may be closely related, as happens in other well established HEIs, but they may also be detached from each other. That is, a HEI may have bureaucratically the corresponding structures in place, but without focusing properly on quality enhancement. As the debate goes on and the new **Law** is still at the beginning of its implementation, the existing context of the work of ARACIS strongly affects both the current activities and future undertakings.

6. Another contextual issue which is of interest for understanding the ARACIS approaches is related to the provisions of Art. 33 of the **Law**. According to this, a HEI or study program may be accredited only by ARACIS, but a periodical quality evaluation may be undertaken by another QA agency located either within or outside Romania. This provision is related to the envisaged European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies, thus allowing any agency that is included in the Register to externally evaluate the academic quality of Romanian HEIs. However, two foundations related to accredited private universities in Romania, established quality assurance agencies are lobbying energetically to be officially recognized by the Romanian authorities in order, as they put it, “to dismantle the domestic monopoly of ARACIS in the domain of QA and accreditation”. The discussions related to this issue have continued for quite a while and

still hold the interest of some constituencies, particularly, though not exclusively, of some private universities. By virtue of its statute, ARACIS has no official say in this matter. It is up to the public authorities to decide on this issue by taking into consideration both domestic and European developments. However, when considering the upcoming European Register, a Romanian HEI may invite any agency included in it to undertake an external quality evaluation, and ARACIS should prove its competing capacities within a wider European context. For ARACIS, the emerging European Higher Education Area and the Register bring about a context with specific challenges and its European framework is the key reference in the immediate future.

7. The **Law** stipulates in Art.20 that ARACIS inherits all contractual rights and obligations of the former CNEAA, as well as its technical infrastructure, staff and databases. By the virtue of this provision, ARACIS bears the legacy of both CNEAA's achievements and shortcomings. CNEAA managed in difficult circumstances to assert the state of law in the system of higher education at the beginning of 1990s which was widely affected by an uncontrolled institutional diversification within the emerging market of higher education. CNEAA approaches, being based on input indicators, are now mostly regarded as having generated at the time of its functioning a lowering of quality and a diminishing of trust among stakeholders in the expansion of higher education structures and particularly in the credentials awarded by newly accredited HEIs. Within such a context, ARACIS activities are expected to be both reparatory and forward looking. ARACIS finds itself in the situation of bearing the CNEAA's legacy while distancing itself constantly, in whatever it plans and achieves, from such a legacy.

When ARACIS promotes, as it should, new approaches, the cultural resistance inherited from the CNEAA's practices is still evident. The most frequent allegations levied at ARACIS are that it has not yet managed to distance itself from CNEAA's former practices. The key problem for ARACIS is thus one of amending a given cultural heritage in order to allow for implementing new approaches to quality assurance and a new quality context.

I.2. ARACIS within the higher education system

Since 1990 the Romanian system of higher education has passed through three stages. The first stage was one of distancing the system and HEIs from their communist past. The key issues of the period 1990-1995 regarded firstly the dismantling of party organizations in the HEIs, and then the reconstruction of curricula, the assertion of university autonomy and academic freedom, and the increasing of student numbers. It was also during this period that academic entrepreneurs established new private and public HEIs so that the increasing demand for higher education was matched by an increasing institutional supply, mostly in law, economics, social and political sciences and humanities. The focus of legislative reform in the early stage of transition was on abrogating all those legal provisions which were considered as being of a communist type, followed in 1993 by the adoption of a law on accreditation, and finally in 1995 by the instituting of a new legislative basis of education. This legal framework of 1995 is still in place, though some of its provisions were progressively changed and/or complemented with new ones, particularly in 2004 when the Bologna principles,

objectives and structures were legally promoted. The second stage corresponded to the period between 1996 and 2004, when the system expanded quantitatively as never before, with regard to both the number of HEIs and students. The governing structure of the system led to the education ministry's policy making role to be mostly of a steering type, while intermediary bodies such as the National Higher Education Funding Council, National Higher Education Research Council, CNEAA, National Rectors Council, Council of Academic Staff Attestation, Council for Diploma Recognition and Equivalence, started to act as ministerial advisory bodies, composed of academics and other university and employers representatives.

The public funding of higher education was changed by introducing a formula based system which took the student as reference and made the distinction between the basic / core funding (e.g. salaries and current expenses) and complementary funding (e.g. capital investments, research funds, scholarships and other student support etc.). Despite this change, which substituted the previous discretionary funding with a more realistic one, based on student-equivalent, lump-sum allocation and institutional accountability in terms of results (graduates), higher education was mostly underfunded. A World Bank loan, PHARE funding and focused Government contribution (1996 - 2001) compensated for such public underfunding, but this was far from the much needed investments, particularly in a period of quantitative expansion. New compensatory measures for the public underfunding of public HEIs had to be identified and, before the end of the 1990s, public HEIs were allowed to enroll both publicly subsidized students and fee paying students ("dual track funding" system). The competition between public and private HEIs

was increased and a higher education market has emerged. However, despite such an increased competition, the demand still exceeded the supply and academic quality issues have not arrived on the top of the institutional agendas. The key issue was only the accreditation, seen as a process based on higher education inputs. As the compliance with required inputs became a rather easy task, the number of both private and public HEIs increased four times in the period 1990-2000, thus reaching the level of 133 HEIs in 2000, out of which 57 were public and 76 private HEIs. The third stage corresponds to the period since the year 2000. While the student numbers continued to increase, that of HEIs started to decrease, mostly because some, indeed very few HEIs, decided to merge or cease their functioning, while 33 others were denied by Government Decision the authorization to function for non-compliance with the quality standards and started functioning on liquidation until all students graduated (Tables 1, 2 and 3, at the end of the text).

The Bologna Process principles have been legally promoted since 2004 so that in 2008 the first generation of Bologna students will graduate with a Bachelor (*Licență*) degree. Certain critical issues are still at work in the higher education systems and two of them may be relevant for understanding some of the challenges facing ARACIS today.

It is important also to underline that institutional expansion is associated with the uniformity of mission statements. All HEIs are universities, and all universities are teaching **and** research institutions, though their research or teaching outcomes vary dramatically. No HEIs identify themselves solely as serving a region or a community, asserting instead their national and indeed European vocation, though at least some of

them would best serve local needs. In the process of approaching a quality external evaluation based on learning outcomes and on quality as “fitness for purpose”, such mission statements may point to a gap between “overstatements” and “outcomes”. ARACIS is still in the initial stage of making effective its results-based-external evaluation, with some unpopular consequences as a result.

For the state HEIs, attempts have been made to differentiate them based on specific quality criteria and indicators related to financing. Thus, if in 2001 a starting percentage of 5% of the formula funding was distributed to universities based on such criteria, in 2007 the percentage was 25%. In some universities staff recruitment provides few opportunities to young academics coming from outside a given institutional setting and clientelistic practices were made public in the press. When the incentives of such a type as quality enhancement and wide opening to new comers are promoted, a noisy rhetoric focused on competition and high performances is substituted to effective evidence-based outcomes. Quality is highly regarded, but demonstrating and mainly achieving it is less of reality. ARACIS is expected in such a context to bring to the fore relevant quality issues, but the context may be indeed challenging for those whose academic ethos is not strongly committed to effective and high/competitive quality.

Finally, mention should be made of the fact that a “national qualifications framework”, though in progress, has not yet been finalized. And when this is eventually finalized, the period of learning to institutionally operate with it in terms of curriculum design and implementation may take quite a while. How this process is going to affect institutional

quality management and evaluation and the ARACIS external evaluation work is a challenging problem which must be dealt with.

Higher education exists in Romania as a public good and should contribute to increasing its relevance as a public trust. It is linked to the improvement of individuals and society as a whole within the European Union. It promotes the value of discovery and learning through research, scholarship and creative activity. By offering educational programs, HEIs contribute to preparing their graduates for productive and active lives as citizens and members of society. The quality assurance and accreditation processes are expected to further promote and assert this role of higher education, and to provide assurance to the public at large, and particularly to students and employers, that HEIs constantly enhance their quality and warrant public trust and support. This is all the more important when considering some recent changes in higher education which demand to be specially addressed by ARACIS in its dealings with quality assurance and accreditation:

- Increased expectations for the performance of graduates, when new national and multinational companies operate in the economy and when increased attention is being paid to the evidence of student learning in terms of outcomes and competencies.
- Increased Europeanization and globalization of higher education, a increasing academic competition and a growing focus on the diversity of students and of their learning needs.

- The development of distance, on line and distributed learning within traditional universities.
- The expansion of postgraduate studies at Master and Doctoral level and the need for their specific quality assurance and accreditation procedures.

Outlining the legal and institutional context of ARACIS work has led us to identifying some challenges ahead. However, the context is not just subject to contemplation. For ARACIS the key approach is that of considering the given context also as a **changing context**, and changes being brought about by ARACIS itself. The view adopted here is that ARACIS is and should be a learning agency which follows closely the existing contexts, while also aiming for their transformation.

Part II: ARACIS and the European quality standards

As mentioned above, much has changed in the higher education sector since CNEAA was established in 1993, and ARACIS is expected to address such changes while also taking account of the recent developments in quality assurance standards and procedures on the global and particularly on the European stage. In this latter respect, it is particularly relevant that the adoption in 2005 of the **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area** by the ministers responsible for

higher education in the Bologna member countries brought to the fore “the European dimension in quality assurance”.

Though ARACIS does not have a long history of its own, two important elements compensate for this. Firstly, it relies on the experiences acquired by CNEAA, of which some are to be built on, while others rejected or indeed actively opposed. Secondly, and most important, it is the framework provided by the European Standards and Guidelines which were taken as reference in the **Law** and which were actively promoted and followed up by ARACIS in the context of the Romanian system and institutions of higher education. The functions and practices of ARACIS correspond with the European Standards and Guidelines and, in what follows, the evaluation of the effectiveness of ARACIS’ performance of the functions is subsumed under the relevant European standards.

II.1. Standard 3.1: *Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education*

The procedures and processes developed by ARACIS for external quality assurance are differentiated along three axes (Fig. 2).

The first one is of a vertical type and differentiates between undergraduate (*licență* equivalent to the Bachelor’s degree) and postgraduate degrees (Master’s degree and Doctorate degree) when referring to study programs, quality assurance and accreditation. While standards, as statements of reference are the same, their corresponding

performance indicators vary from one type of degree (qualification) to the other, being thus specific to *licență*, master or doctorate.

The second axis differentiates between quality assurance and accreditation in terms of the purposes of the external evaluation process. While accreditation is considered as a particular case of quality assurance, the two have also specificities. In the process of accreditation, the external evaluation is expected to certify the compliance of an institution or study program with *predetermined minimal performance indicators*, and is finalized with the “yes/no” binary final judgment which either grants or not the right to function to a HEI or study program. In the process of quality assurance, the external evaluation aims mainly to take as reference the standards and indicators of quality which a HEI considers fit its mission and purposes, and provides an external feed-back for further developing and enhancing its institutional quality provision.

The third axis differentiates between accredited and non-accredited HEIs and study programs. Whenever a provider intends to establish a new HEI or initiates a new study program that corresponds to a specific qualification, that provider is submitted to a process of external evaluation in order to be provisionally authorized and then accredited. Whenever a HEI has been already accredited, its quality management and quality provision are subject to a periodical (every 5 years) external evaluation. The external evaluation of an accredited HEI may also refer to the functioning of about 20% of already accredited study programs which are selected by both the HEI and ARACIS. But the key

reference of the external evaluation is the accredited HEI as a whole, the study programs being selected only as illustrative cases.

Fig.2: External evaluation and its institutional differentiation

Quality Assurance	Accreditation
➤ Accredited HEIs	➤ New HEIs
➤ <i>About 20% of accredited programs from within an accredited HEI</i>	➤ New study programs ➤ Master and Doctoral programs (both old and new)

The Council of ARACIS set up a Department of Quality Assurance and a Department of Accreditation, and delegated to these departments the responsibility for dealing with the external evaluation of institutional quality assurance and accreditation respectively. The Departments rely on disciplinary committees which are selected by the ARACIS Council from among the existing Register of Evaluators for a period of 3 years in order to monitor the activities of external evaluation and to report to the Council of ARACIS on a permanent basis.

Quality Assurance

The **Law** has introduced the provision that accredited HEIs are subject to a periodical (every 5 years) external evaluation of institutional quality assurance mechanisms. The implication is that these HEIs are made fully responsible for establishing and developing those institutional capacities, educational effectiveness and quality management processes that satisfy their specific positioning in the higher education system and for a certain level of accountability to their stakeholders. ARACIS provides, through its

Methodology, all HEIs with a framework of standards and performance indicators which are to be taken as reference points. This means that HEIs are expected to:

- define their own level of performance for each performance indicator in line with their own mission statement;
- establish new standards and performance indicators;
- compare themselves with other HEIs from Romania and from elsewhere by developing appropriate benchmarks;
- inform students, stakeholders and the public at large on their quality provision;
- create databases that correspond to the standards and performance indicators.

When piloting the initial **Methodology**, the external evaluation revealed certain issues of interest.

First of all, there is a considerable variation from one institution to another in terms of availability of data and information and of this being so structured as to provide evidence related to certain standards and indicators. Quality does exist, but demonstrating it in a well structured way has not been so far an institutional issue, just as comparing it within the institution between various programs and with other institutions was mostly implicit, without relying on any systematic information. When requesting for data and information

in order to substantiate a statement on quality, the external evaluators were regarded either as too intrusive or as revealing a sort of collegial distrust.

The second issue of interest refers to the fact that self-evaluation reports were mostly, if not entirely, drafted in positive terms and thus implicitly expecting any external evaluation to endorse this positive view. A “window-dressing” syndrome of self-evaluation reporting often collides with the demand of an external evaluation for substantiating the self-assessment in terms of evidence-based judgments.

Third, the piloting HEIs tend to respond to the ARACIS standards, but they complain that the performance indicators are too detailed, thus making both an internal and an external evaluation heavily bureaucratized and detailed.

Fourth, some external evaluators proved to be more complacent with what they called “collegiality”. The meaning of collegiality is reduced to lack of criticism, complacency and friendliness. Sometimes the prestige of those evaluated was considered to be so high that their views should be automatically taken for granted.

Fifth, HEIs do compare themselves, but only implicitly and un-systematically. The information on other institutions’ performances barely exists and the practice of benchmarking does not exist.

When considering such issues, ARACIS considers it important to:

- increase the number of external evaluators coming from foreign countries;
- look urgently for means of developing its own database on standards and indicators and to link it to corresponding institutional databases;
- initiate a project on quality benchmarking in order to provide a framework for comparability of national with European HEIs;
- provide opportunities for better linking self-evaluations with the external evaluations.

A difficult task following an external evaluation proved to be that of formulating the final judgment with regard to external confidence in institutional quality. The **Methodology** proposed three levels of confidence: *high*, *medium* and *lack of confidence*. Such levels proved to be not discriminatory enough, eliminating too many nuances and variations. This derived from the fact that quality may take certain shapes and values when the institution as a whole is considered, but variations are considerable when study programs are brought into the framework. The truth of the matter is that neither study programs in traditional universities nor these universities have previously been externally evaluated and the external evaluations have revealed that internal quality assurance processes do not function as thought or expected.. Now, when focusing the QA external evaluation on the HEI, and on some of its study programs there has been revealed that the internal QA

does not function as supposed and expected. The Council of ARACIS decided to enlarge the continuum on the scale of confidence. Whenever the final assessment is that a HEI is below the highest level of full confidence, those study programs of the institution which are faced with quality problems, are to be mentioned and a follow up procedure put in place.

In the coming stage of activities, ARACIS is growingly focused on the institutional quality evaluation and less on accreditation. Addressing issues of the sort mentioned above and others that may emerge may prove to be a continuous concern. ARACIS is planning to develop in the period 2008-2011 two projects, one which would demand for the external evaluation of a set of study programs from all HEIs, while the other is to provide opportunities for the evaluation of 60% of accredited universities.

Accreditation

The most common understanding of quality assurance in Romania, due to the recent history of CNEAA, is linked to accreditation. Institutional and program accreditation was indeed a major function of the CNEAA (Annex 4). ARACIS is expected to continue the accreditation of some programs left over from that period, under the transitional provisions of the **Law**, while also accrediting new programs, particularly those of full-time and on-line type as well as Master's and teacher education programs (Annex 7). The Accreditation Department of the ARACIS Council manages accreditation.

The accreditation indicators are much more detailed and quantitatively oriented than those specific to quality assurance. An external evaluation related to accreditation is, for this reason, somehow different from that related to QA. This situation requires some explanation.

i)First of all, there is a historical reason. There was a widely shared view that the indicators used previously for program and institutional accreditation should be refined, but also that at least some of them should be transferred in the new context in order to assure continuity.

ii)Secondly, most of the indicators should be of a quantitative type and refer extensively to inputs, processes and outputs in order to clearly support the final accreditation decision. This would also help ARACIS to deal with contested decisions and defend judicial cases brought against it. Academic entrepreneurs and their institutions and programs continue to emerge, and therefore ARACIS was urged to stick to detailed quantitative indicators while keeping up with basic new standards.

iii)A new category of multiplying programs is of an on line and transnational type. Specific indicators were formulated in this regard too.

iv)Finally, Master's programs have functioned for quite a while, and since 2004 have been mushrooming. However, if there is one type of programs which does

not function adequately then that is the Master's program. There are institutional and external reasons for it. On the labor market there is no clear understanding of the role of a Master's degree and almost no financial incentives for someone to have such a degree. Many students with the license (Bachelor's equivalent) degree already have a job and often return for a Master's degree while working. HEIs and academics have not yet managed to design and implement Master's level curricula in a creative and specific way. With regard to the accreditation of Master's programs two conflicting views are at work. One, which is legally instituted, considers that from the beginning of the academic year 2008-2009 all Bologna type Master's programs should be accredited. This view is based on the principles of the Bologna cycles and aims for consolidating the Master's degree in terms of its quality provision and market relevance. The opposing view is that the Master's programs should be validated by accredited institutions in view of their autonomy. Institutional quality management may well improve Master's programs and ARACIS should further deal only with the external evaluation of institutional quality assurance mechanisms. At the time of drafting this report, ARACIS has externally evaluated and accredited about 471 Master's programs and many other (more than 200) are awaiting external evaluation (Annex 7). If the latter approach will be adopted, we will have two types of Master's programs - accredited and not-needing-accreditation. However, those who passed through the process of accreditation expressed their positive views on the process and promote the idea that only through external evaluation may one better understand the relevance of the program.

v)With regard to doctoral programs, though they should also be accredited by ARACIS, no steps forward have so far been taken, and the final legal resolution regarding the Master's programs may also apply to the doctorate level.

The legal uncertainty regarding research programs (Master and Doctorate) is promoted by both the authorities and some academics from traditional universities. ARACIS has to deal with this uncertainty and it should do more to influence the view that quality in research programs is an issue of utmost importance.

Monitoring quality in higher education

Three stages may be identified with regard to quality monitoring in higher education. The first stage is related to the former CNEAA's activities. During the period 1993-2005, CNEAA focused exclusively on accreditation, paying no attention to quality assurance in the study programs and universities that existed before 1989. This approach generated a division between the traditionally existing universities, whose staff acted as external evaluators, and the newly accredited programs and institutions which were also monitored after accreditation. The key issue is that the traditionally existing universities had never been submitted to external evaluation, exceptions being only those 2 universities which voluntarily asked to be evaluated by the EUA (i.e. the University Babes-Bolyai of Cluj-Napoca, the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Timișoara) or by other agencies (*i.e.* the Academy of Economic Studies of Bucharest etc.). The second

stage was initiated in 2005 by the adoption of the new **Law** on quality assurance, which makes a distinction between QA and accreditation and stipulated that periodically any HEI should be externally evaluated. When piloting the **Methodology on QA**, 8 out of 11 HEIs were traditionally existing universities which had never been externally evaluated. All of them expressed the view that the exercise was very useful, helping them to identify both strengths and weaknesses and to become more reflexive in their future development. It was also revealed during this second stage that the division induced in the first stage may affect the cooperation between ARACIS and some HEIs. The latter are proved to consider that QA mechanisms are too bureaucratically oriented when urging them to collect, process and provide evidence on the state of internal QA. They assume that they know best who they are, where they are and what they should do. The most prestigious domestically consider that there are few available external evaluators who could be comparatively up to the task. ARACIS expects such a historical institutional division to further generate tensions in the process of external evaluation, mainly when considering that in the third stage (2007-2010) all accredited HEIs are to be externally evaluated. During this third stage, the first national report on the state of quality in HE is also to be drafted and the exercise of benchmarking, when defining references for the performance indicators, will also include information from the HEIs operating in the EHEA. The key approach is that such benchmarks will offer references for internal quality provision and evaluation, and that the operational quality assurance of programs is primarily an institutional responsibility. ARACIS will provide referential benchmarks and HEIs will provide quality assured programs and their own benchmarks. In order to draft the envisaged national report on quality in HE, ARACIS is currently developing a project to

be funded out of the EU structural funds. This project (2008-2011) will be focused on: (a) benchmarking; (b) external evaluation of about 60 universities; (c) surveying of students', faculty' and employers' perceptions of quality provision in HE. As such, this project will for the first time in Romania offer the possibility of monitoring and evaluating institutional quality assurance on a systematic basis and in full compliance with the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance contained in Part 3 of the European Standards and Guidelines. In what follows, further references will be made to the extent to which the quality assurance functions of ARACIS satisfy those Standards and Guidelines.

Specification of standards

The **Law** formulates the domains and criteria of concerns for QA. With reference to these, the **Methodology** specifies the standards and performance indicators for QA and accreditation. ARACIS and HEIs consider the standards and performance indicators (PI) as: (a) representing reference points for institutional quality management; (b) offering a framework for collecting information, maintaining databases and processing information which HEIs can use for internal monitoring and external demonstration of QA; (c) providing ARACIS with references in the process of external evaluation. Standards and PI are to be closely related in each HEI with the soon to be finalized National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and with the register of specializations and awards defined periodically by the Government. This approach is under constant development and is faced with tensions. Unfortunately the timing of their convergent development and

approval has so far not been well planned. There are time gaps in between their enforcement. For instance, as the NQF is not yet operational and the register of specializations is subject to constant review, the application of standards is also subject to review in terms of learning outcomes related to a specific qualification. The need for a good and generally accepted reconciliation of the requirements specific to simplicity and rationalization, on the one hand, and with the traditional understandings of well established universities and various subject communities, on the other, is to be further considered. A project focused on a few disciplinary pilot projects (mechanical engineering, law, communication studies, computer studies), to be developed in 2008-2009, may help identifying some key issues for such a process of reconciliation and testing of specific standards. Later, as already mentioned, PIs will be associated with benchmarks.

Use of internal quality assurance procedures (Standard 2.1)

By **Law** each HEI should have in place, under the coordination of the rector, a Commission in charge of QA. ARACIS has translated into Romanian *the European Standards and Guidelines* and disseminated them to all HEIs, together with the **Law** and the ARACIS **Methodology**. HEIs have been invited by ARACIS to elaborate their own internal methodology of QA, emphasizing the need to build up a database in which to store information following the framework provided by the ARACIS Standards and PIs. HEIs are also expected to have in place policies and procedures focused on QA. ARACIS external evaluation of QA is focused on those three domains to which its QA standards

and PIs are legally related: institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management, while also considering European standards for internal QA. Each HEI is expected to have in place a QA Commission, together with policies, a database and specific QA procedures. During the piloting stage, ARACIS discovered that most of the HEIs have QA Commissions in place, but the formal policies and procedures and the database are far from being operational. It is for ARACIS to further work with HEIs and provide whenever possible the necessary assistance.

ARACIS is constantly improving its own internal process to evaluate the QA procedures of the agency itself.

Development of external quality assurance processes (Standard 2.2)

The ARACIS **Methodology** is mostly focused on the external evaluation, and the available **Guides** offering more operational information on either internal or external quality evaluation. During the piloting stage of the **Methodology**, processes of monitoring, research and consultation contributed to the improvement of the **Methodology**. However, a lengthier process of consultation would have been desirable. It was only the limited period allowed for the piloting in the **Law** that generated the time constraint. In addition, as previously mentioned, the new approach in the **Law**, focused on learning outcomes and on other outcomes of institutional teaching and learning activities, would clearly have needed a longer period of transition from the previous approach focused mostly on inputs. This obviously refers to both internal and external evaluation processes, requiring HEIs to make operational the new approach, and for external evaluators to really consider the implications of focusing on outcomes. With

regard to the external evaluators, ARACIS identified two shortcomings. One highlights the need for the *intensive training of external evaluators*. Though during the piloting stage a lot of training sessions were organized, much remains to be done. It is for this reason that a sort of on-line training course combined with face-to-face sessions for discussing various cases from the ARACIS pool will be designed and applied in the second half of 2008 as part of the project mentioned above. The other shortcoming relates to the ways collegiality and peer-reviewing is culturally understood by some external evaluators. The culture of complacency and the general “shyness” of expressing openly a criticism seem to be at work. This is associated with a sort of criticism in the shadows, the multiplication of negative rumors and a small number of instances of open and formal criticism. The formal and informal evaluation follow mostly parallel tracks and open up parallel judgments, and very few bridges built in between the two. The Ethical Code does not seem to help very much in dealing with such an issue. ARACIS should then look with more imagination to identify ways of bringing together formal and informal evaluative judgments.

Criteria for decisions (Standard 2.3)

The criteria for decisions have been developed, disseminated and widely debated. Evidence based views are to be expressed by the external evaluators and both the criteria and the documentation necessary for the evaluation are referred to in the contract signed with the externally evaluated HEI. There are several steps in making a final decision. The panel of institutional or program evaluators reports first to a permanent panel which

includes several representatives of a study domain and which monitors whether the process of external evaluation closely followed the correct procedures. Then the ARACIS Council looks closely at the processes and procedures and either endorses the proposed decision or sends it back to the previous panels for further documentation. The procedure of contesting a final decision is also available to a HEI which is unhappy about the applied procedures or the decision. A new panel then looks into the contents of the contesting letter and informs the Council.

Processes fit for purpose (Standard 2.4)

Much of the envisaged activities of ARACIS are oriented towards institutional QA, while program and institutional accreditation will slowly diminish. This is an important shift when comparing ARACIS focus with the previous activities of CNEAA which were related exclusively to institutional and program accreditation. However, while standards and PIs are common to QA and accreditation, the processes are differentiated and some additional PIs are added for accreditation in order to better fit the purpose. The accreditation processes are of a longer duration and they are associated with a follow-up monitoring and reporting activity. How HEIs will react to the QA follow-up will remain to be seen.

The key concern for ARACIS, as mentioned above, is that of evaluators' training and of increasing the number of foreign experts participating in the evaluation of Romanian universities. So far ARACIS has managed to increase the pool of foreign experts coming

from natural sciences and engineering sciences and to involve some of them in the piloting stage. As planned, ARACIS expects to train about 900 external evaluators and 300 internal evaluators within the 2008-2011 project. Students are involved also in the evaluator panels and ARACIS and student organizations with the support of ARACIS provided basic training for them. How to train students for the processes of external evaluation and how to define their relationships within the evaluator panels remain questions for further review by ARACIS.

In order to further assure processes of fitness for purpose, the ARACIS Council has organized trimester meetings with the external evaluators and with HEI rectors in order to gather feed-back information on ARACIS activities. Representatives of ARACIS are currently involved in the construction of the National Qualifications Framework and in the specification of qualifications descriptors. A general weakness is the specification of learning outcomes for each study program. There is no tradition in this respect and no methodology for university teachers' use. Moreover, examination techniques are widely oriented to test knowledge reproduction and problem solving. This approach generates a gap between ARACIS expectations of evaluating learning outcomes of a wider variety and the general institutional practice of student testing.

ARACIS uses the standard procedure and sequencing of self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up. The experiences have so far demonstrated that the self-evaluation reports are mostly descriptive and overly-positively oriented, so that strengths are overstated and weaknesses barely mentioned. The institutional expectation is that

ARACIS role is either one of endorsing the overall orientation of the self-evaluation report or one of “hunting” weaknesses in order to prove its evaluative role. Both opinions are strongly denied by ARACIS. Either opinion is regarded with defiance, though ARACIS consistently underlines that its role is that of cooperating with all HEIs in order to contribute to quality enhancement. This situation may be regarded as reflecting the current state of Romanian academic culture, and ARACIS should further work on ways of contributing to changing this culture.

Reporting (Standard 2.5)

Any QA review is followed by a report which is initially drafted by the panel of evaluators, analyzed by the permanent panel of evaluators for the study domain in order to make sure that the report is consistent and so-structured as to cover description, analysis, conclusions and recommendations, and finally discussed and endorsed by the ARACIS Council. Following this, the report is sent to the evaluated HEIs and then made public via Internet. A copy is also sent to the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth and a press release is also made. The HEI is expected to discuss it in the Senate and widely disseminate it to students and staff and publish it on its website. When considering the experience acquired so far, ARACIS noticed that the descriptive part of the reports is disproportionately longer than the analytical part and that many recommendations are formulated in too general terms, so that wordy expressions may hide the direct and relevant meanings of a criticism or of an encouragement. While in the text of a report a criticism is openly formulated, in the conclusions and recommendations

this is less so. This approach seems to be very much in line with that culture of complacency mentioned above and it needs to be further addressed by ARACIS.

With regard to accreditation, including authorization, it is stipulated by **Law** that the report and the decision should be firstly communicated to the HEI, which can contest them in certain respects. When the report and the decision are finalized, they are made public and transmitted to the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth for legal follow-up. Not later than May of each year, the Ministry publishes the list of provisionally authorized and accredited HEIs and study programs to inform HE candidates before the admission period.

Follow-up procedures (Standard 2.6)

The **Law** and the **ARACIS Methodology** provides for ARACIS to set conditions including follow up procedures and demanding for the implementation of recommendations. When appropriate, some recommendations made by external evaluators are of an informal type: request for supplementary information, minor corrections in curricula and staffing, etc.

In the process of the periodical evaluation of a HEI, when the situation demands, the recommendations are to be followed-up by a “*work plan*” which is drafted by the HEI and then agreed upon with the ARACIS panel and Council. The duration of implementation is at least one academic year, and during this period the ARACIS panel

visits the HEI twice. The final evaluation is of a summative type and focuses specifically on how the recommendations have been implemented. In case of a HEI failing to implement in due time, as specified by the law, the expected the recommendations, ARACIS proposes to the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth to suspend the status of accreditation granted to the respective HEI and this enters into a process of interrupting its activities. Such an experience has not yet been encountered, but the possibility exists. With regard to accreditation, after a HEI or a study program has been provisionally authorized, this is subject to an annual monitoring process, the final leading to the granting (or not) of the status of accreditation. The follow-up is thus one of a long duration and aims for constant quality improvement. The changes in the composition of the evaluators panel may lead, and indeed it has led, to changes in the assessment of institutional progress. This is induced by the validity and reliability of assessment criteria and ARACIS should further work on this issue.

Periodic reviews (Standard 2.7)

As previously mentioned, the accredited HEIs are legally subject to an external quality evaluation every 5 years. ARACIS has designed at this stage two projects to be funded out of the EC structural funds: (a) a program oriented project which will be operational by the beginning of 2008 and aims to evaluate all study programs in mechanical engineering, law, communications studies, mathematics/informatics from the perspective of the relationships between qualifications descriptors, curricula and learning outcomes; (b) a project which aims to externally evaluate about 60 accredited HEIs on a voluntary

basis in the period 2008-2011. This is indeed a period of consolidating the ARACIS approaches and expertise, and one which will be finalized with an overall report on the state of quality in the Romanian HE system.

System wide analysis (Standard 2.8)

The quality in the Romanian system of HE has never been so far subject to a summary report. There have been overall reports, in which quality was just a small chapter, and certain studies or synthesis of CNEAA activities which approached quality in HE in a fragmentary way. There are also lots of rumors and guesses, but no comprehensive and analytical reports. As just mentioned, following on the project mentioned above, such a report is envisaged to be made available in 2011 and ARACIS has already designed the approach and methodology. Moreover, ARACIS envisages the prospects of developing a small internal research capacity of its own in order to explore issues related to the dynamics of quality in HE, mainly with reference to the developments in the knowledge industry, research and labour market, as well as to benchmarking and the perception of quality in HE among students and staff. Also, ARACIS benefits from public information provided by the consultative councils of the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth – especially the National Higher Education Funding Council and the National Higher Education Research Council.

II. 2. ARACIS and other standards specified in Part 3 of the European Standards and Guidelines

Official status (Standard 3.2)

ARACIS was established by the **Law** for the purposes, *inter alia*, of externally evaluating and quality assuring higher education providers who either currently, or plan to award HE qualifications. In view of the Art. 16(1) of the **Law**, “ARACIS is an autonomous public institutions, of national interest, having a legal status (“*personalitate juridică*”) and its own budget of revenues and expenses”. In order to further assure the legal basis for ARACIS, the **Law** stipulates that the initial ARACIS headquarters, organizational structures and internal rules of functioning are proposed by ARACIS and adopted by Government Decision. The Government and particularly the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth has no institutional influence on the ARACIS decisions with regard to the external evaluation of the institutional and program quality provision.

ARACIS is thus an autonomous, officially (legally) entrusted Agency which provides services related to HE quality assurance and accreditation. The services are provided in three related ways: (a) by co-operating with HEIs for identifying quality issues from a Romanian and European (global) perspective; (b) by responding to specific demands of the national authorities with regard to academic quality assurance issues and to quality external evaluation; (c) by responding to academic entrepreneurs who intend to establish new study programs and/or HEI through processes of accreditation. In addition,

whenever ARACIS considers it relevant, it may initiate processes of addressing specific quality issues through studies and external evaluations.

Activities (Standard 3.3)

The core statutory activities of ARACIS include the following: (a) accreditation of study program (license, master and doctorate) and HEIs; (b) institutional-level quality assurance activities through agreement and review of quality assurance management and culture. Art. 17 of the **Law** stipulates in detail all these activities. While ARACIS is the only QA agency which can accredit programs and HEIs in Romania, institutional-level quality assurance may be undertaken by other agencies which enter into contractual relations with the beneficiaries Ministry of Education, Research and Youth under the condition they are included in the European Register of QA Agencies.

Resources (Standard 3.4)

In terms of human resources, ARACIS operates with four types of staff:

i) *Administrative staff* who is led by an executive director, responsible for the administration, and a financial director, responsible for financial matters, both of them accountable to the President of the ARACIS Council.

ii) *Professional staff* who assist the directors of the Accreditation Department and QA Department of the ARACIS Council respectively. Their responsibilities are to receive and technically control institutional applications, distributing them to the panels of evaluators and following them up.

iii) *The ARACIS Council* is composed of 15 members. The first members of the Council were nominated by the Parliament Upper Chamber (Senate) (5), the Government (5) and the Rectors Council (5) and they were entrusted to draft the ARACIS Methodology of QA, approved by a Government Decision, and to establish the basic regulations for ARACIS. After 6 months of this provisional Council's functioning, two thirds (*i.e.* 10 members) of the Council stepped down and the other remaining five, together with the leaders of the Romanian Academies of Science and of the Rectors Council, opened up a competition among self-proposed academics who wanted to serve as ARACIS Council members. The present composition of the ARACIS Council was established one year ago, following this selection procedure. Every three years 2/3 of the Council's membership are renewed via a national competitive procedure. The selection Committee is composed of the 5 remaining Council members and 6 members nominated by the Academies of Science and the Rectors Council. A Council's member can not act in ARACIS for more than 2 consecutive mandates. The existing Council decides by consensus who steps down and who continues for an additional mandate

iv) *The external evaluators* are voluntarily registered in the ARACIS Register of evaluators and include both Romanian and foreign academics. There are two types of external evaluators. For each domain of study (e.g. engineering, economics, etc.), a permanent commission of evaluators supervises accreditation and QA activities related to their domain. They report to the ARACIS Council. The other category of external evaluators is randomly selected into a panel of evaluators entrusted with the institutional and/or program assessment. They report to the permanent commission of their study domain. All external evaluators are paid for their work by applying a specific formula.

The existing staff is, for the time being, considered adequate to enable the Agency to organize and operate its external quality assurance processes in an active and efficient manner based on the current scale of activities. However, further training of the ARACIS professional staff and external evaluators is needed, and in the coming period a contingency project is expected to respond to such needs.

With regard to the financial income, ARACIS relies on the following sources:

- *Fee income* from higher education and training providers who pay for the external evaluation for either the accreditation or quality assurance periodical evaluation. The level of fees are decided by the Government and differentiated by specific criteria.

- *Contracts* with the Ministry of Education when it requests the undertaking of specific activities, as happened with the piloting of the **Methodology** (2006-2007), and/or the external evaluation of institutional QA management.
- *Participation in public competitions (tenders)* for EU structural funds when the priorities of interest regard quality in higher education. This possibility has been recently opened up and ARACIS is active in designing competitive projects.

In 2007, fee income amounted to about 60% of ARACIS revenue and the Contract with the Ministry of Education made up the rest. ARACIS has managed to keep the expenditures within its agreed annual budget and secure a roll-over revenue of about 30% of the 2007 budget. For the coming period of three years, ARACIS intends to increase its income by relying on the structural funds. The three projects in which it is currently involved address issues related to teaching and research quality, for teaching quality being the lead Agency.

The financial auditing of ARACIS is done by registered external auditors and the accounting rules are those of an agency of public utility.

Mission Statement (Standard 3.5)

The initial mission statement of ARACIS was adopted before the piloting of its *Methodology*. This was recently reviewed, following the transition and piloting period,

and a new statement of the mission, vision, values and objectives were made public in October 2007. The statement of the mission reads as follows:

The mission of ARACIS is to assure the achievement of the public interest through quality standards in the realization of study programs and in the awarding of qualifications in higher education, and through supporting the continuous enhancement of quality management in line with the principles and objectives of the “Bologna Process”.

In realizing this mission, ARACIS takes as reference the framework provided by four principles which underline its work:

i) *Cooperation*: ARACIS collaborates with HEIs and similar QA agencies in order to promote good QA practices;

ii) *Information and transparency*: ARACIS uses appropriate means of communication for widely informing its stakeholders and the public at large on its activities and outcomes. ARACIS makes public its annual review and publishes every three years report on the quality in higher education;

iii) *European visibility*: ARACIS will closely cooperate with other European bodies in order to contribute to asserting the “European dimension” of QA in higher education;

iv) *Quality*: ARACIS will constantly review and enhance the quality of its own activities.

The key activities of ARACIS are the following:

- setting standards, identifying performance indicators and benchmarks that would contribute to the development of institutional quality culture and accreditation of HEIs and study programs;
- delivering services to academic communities that contribute to quality improvement and raising quality standards;
- providing such information which would assure the public, including students, that study programs and institutions have quality assurance mechanisms and procedures in place and are either at the level or above an acceptable threshold level of quality.

In order to guide its future activities, following the conclusions and recommendations made in the post-piloting monitoring report, ARACIS defined a “policy matrix” with clearly stated its goals and actions for the period 2008-2011 (Annex 2).

Independence (Standard 3.6)

Under the **Law**, ARACIS enjoys a high degree of freedom in all its operational activities. There is no formal possibility, for any governmental or institutional body, to influence one way or the other the processes of recruiting/nominating external evaluators and of their external evaluation. The membership of the ARACIS Council is set out in the **Law** for the initial and successive compositions, and the Council is fully autonomous in setting up its future membership. The decisions of the Council are made according to clear procedures, the right to appeal is granted, and the procedures for dealing with such appeals are in place. ARACIS is an autonomous body and is independent from any external interference with its work and decisions.

External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies (Standard 3.7)

The process, domains, criteria, standards and performance indicators used by ARACIS are defined in the *Methodology* and its accompanying *Guides*. The *Methodology* is legally enforced by a Government Decision in order to provide the legal basis for ARACIS' actions and approaches. All these documents are available in Romanian and English both in printed and on line (ARACIS website) versions.

These documents have two complementary functions: (a) to provide a framework for HEIs and study programs in their approach to developing and improving quality; (b) to be used in the process of quality external evaluation. The evaluative processes includes: (i) a self-assessment by the provider of the quality assurance process in view of its mission and objectives; (ii) an external assessment by a panel of independent experts randomly

selected from the ARACIS register of external evaluators; (iii) the drafting and then publication of a report including decisions, recommendations and formal outcomes, including the final summative judgement; (iv) a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the provider in the light of the recommendations formulated in the report.

The *Guide* for self-assessment underlines the difference and the relationships that are expected to exist with regard to the *analysis* of the quality and the *evidence* made available for documenting that analysis. The expectation is that the self-assessment is as analytical as possible, identifying both strengths and weaknesses. This should be the outcome of an on-going internal process that involves staff, students and stakeholders. The domains and criteria taken as references are: institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management. External assessment panels always include a student as a full member of the panel. Site visits are planned well in advance and the calendar and actions are agreed upon by the panel and those externally assessed. Before proceeding to draft a report on the site visit, the panel reports to the representatives of the provider, without entering into the formulation of final decisions. The panel draft report is submitted firstly to the permanent commission in order to assure that the procedures applied and the contents of the report are in line with the regulations. In case certain points do not seem to be well documented, the panel is invited to further the evidence. Then the report is sent to the ARACIS Council for analysis and endorsement, after which this is made public. The provider has the right to appeal. A follow-up policy is proposed by the provider by considering the recommendations. ARACIS reads it and cooperates

with the provider for finalizing the follow-up which is to be implemented during a period of an academic year.

ARACIS has been constantly committed to achieving in a professional manner the requirements of evaluation processes. Among the strategies that have been so far used are: (i) a member of the ARACIS Council accompanies the institutional evaluation panel, negotiates with the rector of the institution the calendar and the process, and supports the preparation of the report; (ii) in selecting the panel, due attention is paid to achieving a balance and maintaining a high level of competence; (iii) the evaluation is consistently made with reference to predefined criteria and standards. The key shortcoming of the new approach based on learning outcomes is, as already stated, the overall weak academic culture of operating with learning outcomes. It is in this respect that ARACIS will invest much of its future work related to the operations of the qualifications framework.

Accountability procedures (Standard 3.8)

A monitoring commission is in place. Its membership includes presidents of the Academies of Science and academics with policy-making and managerial experience. All key policy initiatives are submitted for the Commission's review and advice, and its members are invited to observe whenever possible the working of the evaluators' panels and the ARACIS Council meetings. During the piloting of the Methodology, members of this Commission were contracted on a personal basis to write a report on the approach to piloting and on the Council and panels activities in the piloting. It was mainly this

Commission's report that provided the information for proposing the policy matrix of ARACIS for the coming three years of activity. Students also prepared a report on the **Methodology** and its piloting, which greatly contributed to the drafting of the policy matrix.

ARACIS enforces an ethical code (Annex 8) in which values and norms are well specified for providing both no-conflict-of interest mechanisms and respect for ethical principles. An enforcement mechanism is associated with the Code and a Council commission is responsible for its enforcement.

The Bureau members of the Council as well as the Council as a whole remain in close contact with the Rectors Council, the Education Committees of the Parliament and representatives of the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth. Periodical meetings, participation in each other's meetings and exchanges of information also take place.

Some actions for improving the accountability procedures are envisaged:

- activate more thoroughly the monitoring Commission for providing expert advice on ARACIS policies;
- introduce a questionnaire focused on the evaluators' panels post-evaluation feed-back;
- pay more attention to student involvement and views with regard to quality evaluation;

- introduce a formal mechanism for developing further the quality of ARACIS services.

Part III. Summary of observations and recommendations

ARACIS made important steps forward in distancing itself from the old CNEAA and in making itself an important actor of the Romanian higher education system by implementing the provisions of the new **Law**. The new approach to quality assurance, focused on outcomes, has started to be initiated and has well grounded roots. ARACIS is operating in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines. The following achievements are note worthy:

- Policies and procedures for all the key provisions of the **Law** have been established, piloted and put in place;
- The Council's major functions have been implemented;
- New openings towards the development of new institutional quality cultures have been provided;
- A new generation of quality (self) evaluators is beginning to emerge.

This being recognized, much remains to be done:

- The selection and training of external evaluators must be urgently addressed in a consistent and substantive way. The number of foreign quality evaluators

in the Evaluators Register should be increased and their participation in institutional and program panels should be also increased.

➤The work of the universities Commissions responsible for institutional quality assurance should be more actively related with that of ARACIS for achieving convergent approaches and results, particularly in the process of developing institutional quality cultures.

➤The ARACIS policy matrix (2008-2011) should be consistently implemented and feed-back to beneficiaries as well as their cooperation should be assured.

➤Standards and PI should be constantly reviewed in order to lead to their periodical improvement based on benchmarking within a wide European context, and in close co-operation with HEIs.

➤The promotion of institutional good practices via publications and ARACIS website should become part of Council's current policy.

➤ARACIS cooperation in operationalising the NQF should be increased.

➤Cooperation with the sister QA Agency responsible for pre-university education (ARACIP) should be up-graded.

➤The report on the state of quality in the Romanian system should be well prepared on an annual basis in order to deliver a well documented summation report in 2011.

➤External evaluation processes should be improved by:

- better briefing the panel members;
- increasing the number of foreign panel members;
- assuring an effective and comprehensive debriefing of panels;
- increasing the quality of external evaluation reports;
- improving the follow-up activities

For addressing such issues, ARACIS has proposed three projects focused on quality of teaching and quality of research. These are jointly proposed with the National Higher Education Research Council, National Higher Education Funding Council, Rectors Council and National Qualifications Framework Authority (ACPART). ARACIS has the key responsibility for the one focused on QA in higher education and addresses issues related to: external evaluators training, institutional evaluation, benchmarking and the report on the state of quality in HE. In three years time, particularly after implementing these envisaged projects, ARACIS hopes to enter into a new stronger stage in its development.

Annexes

- Annex 1: Monitoring report
- Annex 2: ARACIS Policy matrix for 2008-2011
- Annex 3: Government Urgency Ordinance no. 75/2005 Regarding the Quality Assurance in Education
- Annex 4: Institutional and program accreditation by CNEAA (1993-2004)
- Annex 5: ARACIS Methodology of quality assurance in higher education
- Annex 6: Guides
- Annex 7: Numbers and types of programs (to be) accredited by ARACIS
- Annex 8: Ethical Code
- Annex 9: The Romanian Education system