

Reinforcing Quality Assurance in Romanian Higher Education

ANA-MARIA DIMA¹

*National School of Administrative and Political Studies,
Bucharest, Romania*

Abstract:

Since 1993, the quality assurance system in Romania has gained considerable experience. This experience was recently recognized in 2008 by the ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education through the admission of ARACIS as a full member of EQAR: the European Quality Assurance Register. The Board of ENQA agreed to grant ARACIS's full membership of ENQA for five years from 2 June 2009. This article explores the benefits of membership for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ARACIS, comparing to other regional and global quality assurance agencies networks. The common features and differences between ARACIS and other European agencies are questioned through the frameworks of ENQA and INQAAHE as a case study.

Keywords: Bologna Process, Quality Assurance Agencies, Accreditation, Learning Outcomes, Recognition of Qualifications

Introduction

Within the Bologna Process, the European cooperation for quality assurance and recognition was one of the main objectives of the higher education architecture until 2010. Both the higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies at the national level are involved in the unifying endeavors at the European level through the ENQA: the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education the former European Network for Quality Assurance and the EQAR: the European Quality Assurance Register.

Of course, there is also a competition level among some regional quality assurance agencies established in different parts of Europe with the purpose of getting legitimacy at European level beyond and even over ENQA. However, regional interests have always existed and national interests were even more obvious, but the consensus of the 46 countries expressed through the Bologna Process is hard to be accomplished by few or some regional agencies. For this reason, the purposes of this article remain connected at the ENQA level of reference considered as the most legitimated European agency.

The research questions leading the discourse of this article have reference to:

1. How were the proceedings followed by ARACIS in order to become a full member of EQAR and ENQA?

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2. Which are the common points and differences between ARACIS and other quality assurance agencies from Europe or from other parts of the globe?
3. What are the advantages (for Romania) gathered after the consideration of ARACIS as a full member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education INQAAHE and the European Network for Quality Assurance ENQA?
4. Is there a legal initiative for a private quality assurance agency and what is the utility of the occurrence of a private quality assurance agency in Romania?

Case studies are the preferred research strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control on the events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2003). For this reason, this article can be seen as the case study of ARACIS organizational evolution into an ENQA member. The case study research strategy is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated (Yin, 2003). ARACIS is the unique unit of analysis in this case study based on secondary data analysis of the available documents and reports made public through this agency website.

New trends in European quality assurance direct attention towards the need to comply with more democratic procedures and more emphasis on the valorization of learning outcomes. Evaluation of competences of higher education graduates according to the European Framework of Qualifications EQF and employability are the new challenges for quality assurance indicators.

Nevertheless, the competition among the quality assurance agencies for legitimacy is a common issue in USA, where a diversity of public and private quality assurance agencies are present, but in Europe so far, since the initiation of the Bologna process, a hidden competition and an open cooperation is present only among public national and regional agencies for quality assurance in higher education.

At the 3rd European Quality Assurance Forum organized in 2009 by the European Universities Association, this direction was underlined: “Perhaps a democratic quality assurance is one that starts with the key stakeholders and asks what they want and explores whether their expectations are fulfilled.” (Harvey 2009, p. 7)

With a view to the democratization of quality assurance procedures, ARACIS has involved in the quality process all relevant stakeholders, capable to provide innovative information for the future: students and their families, professional associations, public and private universities represented by their management teams, international organizations and teaching and research staff from research and development units.

Proceedings for ARACIS to become a full member of ENQA

Becoming a full member agency of the European Network for Quality Assurance ENQA is not an easy way for the candidate quality agencies all over Europe. More precisely, the candidate agencies have to go through an in-depth auditing exercise in order to prove the accomplishment of the European quality standards required for membership.

The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in 2000 to promote European co-operation in the field of quality assurance. In November 2004 the General Assembly transformed the Network into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

ENQA has full members agencies from 21 countries and candidate members from 6 countries. Membership of the association is open to quality assurance agencies in the signatory states of the Bologna Declaration. A total of 47 quality assurance agencies and associations of higher education have so far joined the association.

ENQA forms together with EUA, EURASHE, ESU, and with the European Commission as an observer member, the so-called E4 Group. The four organizations organize jointly a Quality

Assurance Forum (QAF) on a yearly basis.

ENQA had the important task of preparing, in co-operation and consultation with the other E4 members, a report on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area which was adopted by the European Ministers of Education in the Bergen Summit of May 2005. A further report on EQAR was submitted by the E4 Group to the London ministerial meeting of May 2007.

Over the academic year 2007/2008, the European University Association (EUA) was invited to conduct an audit of ARACIS – The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Having examined the evidence in conjunction with each of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), EUA has recommended that ARACIS should be admitted as a full member to the European Quality Assurance Register EQAR, which is an important moment in the process of becoming a full member of ENQA.

On the basis of its scrutiny of the final review report on ARACIS, the ENQA Board and its Review Committee agreed that ARACIS met the necessary requirements for being granted ENQA Full Membership for five years from 2 June 2009.

ARACIS is the successor agency to the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA), the previous quality assurance and accreditation body established by Law 88/1993 on accreditation of higher education institutions and recognition of diplomas. CNEAA ceased its activities in 2005, after adoption of the Government Emergency Ordinance (GEO) no. 75/2005 regarding Quality Assurance in Education. In April 2006 the ordinance was adopted and became a law.

The main difference between ARACIS and CNEAA is the fact that CNEAA was functioning under the coordination of the Romanian Parliament, while ARACIS is an autonomous public institution, of national interest, a legal entity with its own income and expenditure budget (Law nr. 75/2005, article 16) with the status of an independent agency.

According to the 2006 legislation, the new ARACIS Methodology and Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes and institutions were in the pilot phase in 11 universities over the academic year 2006-2007. Based on this exercise resulted an evaluation report that served for the modification of the accreditation methodology.

ARACIS is a candidate member of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ENQA since May 2007. Since this date, ARACIS followed the necessary procedures in order to become a full member of the ENQA.

EUA appointed a panel of three members, more precisely three European senior higher education leaders and a secretary, in order to undertake the audit of ARACIS.

The EUA audit was organized in 2008 around three distinct strands:

- Strand 1: Review of performance, organization and structures of the secretariat and board of ARACIS;
- Strand 2: Review of the accreditation methodology and procedures;
- Strand 3: Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

These distinct strands were evaluated in four main stages. These stages included:

5. The self-evaluation report: ARACIS was responsible for writing a self-evaluation report based on ENAQ Guidelines for National Reviews. These included an independent evaluation report on the pilot phase of ARACIS external evaluation activity, published in 2007; the relevant legislation, ARACIS policy, methodology and user guides, data regarding previous accreditation activity in Romania; the code of professional ethics, and further information about the Romanian higher education system.
6. The site visits: the EUA panel made a first visit to ARACIS from 6-8 February 2008 and a second visit from 13 to 16 May 2008, in order to explore the main issues identified during the first visit.

7. External report and quality improvement plan: the EUA panel was responsible for delivering this evaluation report following the end of the site visits. ARACIS will consider the panel's report, and develop a quality improvement plan to implement the recommendations in the report. The panel's report and the quality improvement plan will be published both.
8. Basis for evidence gathered: the review panel collected information by: using the self evaluation report, the independent evaluation report of the pilot ARACIS phase of activity and two site visits at ARACIS. During the site visits, meetings and interviews were held with: ARACIS executive board and council members and management staff; ARACIS technical staff. ARACIS expert commission members active in the pilot phase, Representatives of universities involved in the pilot stage, Representatives of students, Representatives of Parliament Education Committees, Representatives of the National Council of Rectors, Representatives of Employers; the Minister of Education and experts working at the funding authority of the Ministry of Education.

This comprehensive audit took into consideration the context and constraints of the quality assurance for the Romanian higher education system and recommended the consistent use of precise and well-understood terminology, expanding on present legal definitions: "in order for ARACIS to achieve success in overcoming these challenges, it will need to ensure that there is improved clarity in the communication of concepts regarding quality assurance and quality improvement matters." (EUA, 2008, p. 7)

The overall recommendation of EUA for ARACIS was favorable for becoming a full member of the ENQA.

A question still remains: why it took so long - 16 years, for CNEAA and ARACIS to become full members of ENQA (as both were candidate members)? What were the reasons for such a long institutional evaluation process?

It seems that some issues in the legislation are the answer. Compliance with ESG: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education was one of the main conditions in order to become a full member of the ENQA. Although the accreditation experience of ARACIS could be considered since 1993 when the CNEAA was created, in the requirements for becoming a full member of ENQA, this experience was not entirely valued due to the fact that the relevant Romanian legislation was finalized in 2006, after the adoption of: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance - ESG that were taken as a key reference in the law. Actually, the ESG principles and standards had been adopted in 2005 by European ministers at their Bologna process conference in Bergen, therefore it was difficult for ARACIS to become a full member before 2005. ARACIS is not the only agency that had this objective. In the next section are addressed the similarities and differences between ARACIS and other QA agencies in Europe.

ARACIS and Other Quality Assurance Agencies in Central and Eastern Europe

In Romania, in 2006/2007 were registered 785.506 students out of which 520.263 students in the public sector and 265.243 students in the private sector. The number of students increased in the next academic year 2007/2008 to 896.258 students mainly as a result of the increase of the number of students in the private sector, respectively 379.608 students in the private sector (Report MECT, 2008:57). Consistent efforts at institutional and system levels were made in order to maintain quality and increase the number of students at the same time.

Romania was one of the first countries in the Central and Eastern Europe that established a quality assurance agency named the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation CNEAA in 1993. Regulated by Law 88/1993, this quality assurance agency occurred mainly

due to the mushrooming of the private universities. Comparing to the neighborhood countries, the development of private higher education institutions in Romania was astonishing rapid. Although Bulgaria, Russia and the Republic of Moldova registered rapid growing numbers in the private sector, only Poland reached almost 30% of the total number of students in the private sector, having a similar development to the Romanian private higher education sector between 1998 – 2002.

The task of CNEAA was very difficult: during the period 1993 – 2004 were received 223 requests from private higher education providers for provisional authorization, out of which 87 request files were approved. From 2005, ARACIS replaced CNEAA and has inherited from CNEAA an input-based methodology and understanding of quality assurance. The EUA audit noticed that this approach based on input factors, was in fact the traditional measure of quality assurance in the most countries of Europe for the past decade. The Bologna process stimulated the focus on student learning outcomes and acquired competencies.

According to ARACIS, from 2008 there are 56 public universities accredited and 27 accredited private universities in Romania. Additionally, a number of 26 private higher education institutions are still provisionally authorized to provide higher education for a period of three years from the date of authorization.

CNEAA and ARACIS made the evaluation of study programmes and institutional evaluation, meanwhile the evaluation of student learning outcomes translated into academic qualifications was transferred to another agency, National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Social and Economic Environment (ACPART).

According to the Romanian Government Decision no. 1375/2005, the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Social and Economic Environment (ACPART) is the national authority for the establishment of the national qualifications framework in higher education and its regular updating.

Defined by the European Qualifications Framework - EQF, a qualification is the formal acknowledgement of the value of the individual learning outcomes for the labour market by means of a study document (diploma, certificate) awarding a legal right to practice a profession. Learning outcomes are a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values or/and competences a person has acquired or is able to demonstrate after the completion of a learning process. Based on the European Qualifications Framework, the National Qualifications Framework in Romania was designed at ACPART as a sole instrument to determine the qualifications structure and ensure national recognition as well as international comparability and compatibility of qualifications acquired through the higher education system.

ARACIS should administrate the National Register of Higher Education Programmes and ACPART should administrate the National Register of Higher Education Qualifications. In practice, so far none of the two registers were finalized so far as functional interactive data bases.

Although located in the same building, ARACIS and ACPART do not have common projects or directions of action, functioning separately as two autonomous agencies with different mission and status, different staff and different resources. As evaluation of competences of higher education graduates according to the European Framework of Qualifications EQF and employability are the new challenges for quality assurance indicators one should expect a closer cooperation between the two agencies for the future.

In terms of organizational structure and staff competencies, ARACIS has many common features with other quality assurance agencies in the region, members in the CEE Network. The Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education CEEN was founded on October 13, 2001 in Cracow, Poland, and was formally established on October 19, 2002 in Vienna. The CEE Network is a non-governmental and non-profit organization and represents quality assurance agencies from 16 countries in the region.

The conclusions of Hoffmann's study from 2006 on the CEE Network, were that accreditation is the predominant QA approach in the region, and the great majority of the CEEN agencies assesses

the quality of the study programmes and accredits these. The accreditation councils in most cases are appointed by the Government (strong governmental legitimacy); minority appointed by the stakeholders and their size varies from 8 to 30 members appointed for a term of two to six years. These councils are always composed by academics, sometimes by labour market representatives, QA experts and scientific/ professional associations, containing students in only two cases.

Hoffman noticed that there is a great number of similarities in the organization procedures and a number of differences. The similarities are shaped by the ENQA membership criteria as a benchmark for CEEN in setting European standards, while the differences comes from the national context of higher education institutional and historic diversity.

About differences it is interesting to mention the example of Norway. In terms of evaluation criteria and structure, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), created in 2003 is the main authority of the country. Norwegian higher education institutions must have a well established academic network both nationally and internationally in order to be accredited. This aspect relates to the structure of NOKUT that has a special section that deals with recognition of internationally obtained education and credits (B. Stensaker, 2004, p. 352, 360). For Romania, this type of section is included in the structure of the Ministry of Education and Research, not in the structure of ARACIS.

INQAAHE and ENQA Membership Advantages for ARACIS

ENQA is relevant and representative at the European level through the Bologna Process, but at the global level, ENQA is also a member of the INQAAHE, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. If in the Bologna process are involved 46 countries, in INQAAHE are present almost 100 countries.

ARACIS is a full member of INQAAHE and a full member of ENQA. Both European and Global networks represent the Quality Assurance community with shared interests and a common professional language for those looking for a reliable ground in the Quality Assurance profession.

In order to provide a clear picture of the global INQAAHE landscape, one should mention that this global network was established in 1991 with few members and it has grown to 180 members in nearly 100 countries, proving the fact that QA practitioners link with other professionals all over the world.

M.J. Le Maitre noticed that regional or special interest networks are a new development, which has really come to age only in the last five or six years. Many regional networks, sometimes are overlapping in INQAAHE:

9. North and South America: RIACES: Red Iberoamericana Para la Acreditación De La Calidad De La Educación Superior, CANQATE: Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education, ASPA: Association of Specialized & Professional Accreditors;
10. Europe: ENQA European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, CEEN The Network of Central and Eastern European Quality, NOQA: Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education;
11. Africa: AfriQAn: African Quality Assurance Network;
12. Middle Est: ANQAHE: Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education;
13. Asia Pacific: APQN: Asia-Pacific Quality Network.

In a schematic representation, based on four layers, the place of ARACIS in the regional and global system is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: *ARACIS within the Quality Assurance Networks systems*

The regional networks occurred as a geo-political response to the common interests such as: mobility, recognition of qualifications, credit transfer, the impact of trans-national education.

INQAHE encourage double membership, in order to allow both for regional and global exchange. As noticed, ARACIS has taken seriously this recommendation being member of ENQA and INQAHE. Also, INQAHE coordinate the activities of the regional networks, encourage and facilitate communications between the regional networks and grants formal recognition of regional networks in the different activities organized by INQAHE.

Some advantages gathered from the INQAHE and ENQA membership for ARACIS comes from addressing the shared priorities of capacity building (exchange and development of technical staff, training for self assessment and external reviews) both of existing and new agencies, showing the effectiveness and impact of QA processes; promotion and advocacy of QA, dealing with diversity of higher education institutions, students and social demands, analysis of standards and procedures of programs with a stronger international approach, studies and research on specific issues and new types of QA mechanisms.

Public and Private Quality Assurance Agencies in Romania

Under the present legislation, ARACIS is the only body in Romania certified to propose the authorization and accreditation of a higher education provider and its academic programmes.

For external evaluations of quality assurance, Romanian higher education institutions may also apply to other institutions. Article 23 (1) of the Law states that accredited Romanian universities may seek external periodic quality assessment either from ARACIS or from any other QA agency, national or international (located either within or outside Romania), included in the European Register. Moreover, Article 33 (3) states that “the accredited education provider shall be externally assessed every 5 years by ARACIS, or by any other national or international agency, according to the agreements concluded.”

Some private providers of higher education in Romania (Nicolescu L., 2003) consider the accreditation received from ARACIS as a legal requirement they have to fulfill, but in practice, they think that it is more important for their graduates to prove that their institution was authorized by the professional association relevant in their national and international field of practice, or to prove the fact that they provide the same type of courses using the same academic content as the most prestigious universities in their field.

For example, CODECS is trying to convince their candidates and graduates that their courses are the same with the courses thought in the universities from the Great Britain and United States. CODECS offers the MBA Programme of the Open University Business School, which is a post-graduate qualification for managers, attesting the fact that the respective graduates have the necessary competencies for leading an organization or assuming a leadership position within an organization. CODECS managed to get recognition on the work market for their graduates, although they don't have an accreditation from ARACIS, stating that the international recognition of the OUBS MBA Programme is given by its validation by all 3 international accreditation institutions for management education in United Kingdom: Association of Masters of Business Administration; European Foundation for Management Development and beginning with September 2004 by the American association The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business –AACSB. However, the exception of CODECS seems to be unique in the Romanian higher education context.

A study concerning success on the work market of public and private higher education graduates undertaken by Luminița Nicolescu in 2003 underlined the fact that there are some differences between the two categories of graduates in terms of professional skills development with a clear advantage for public graduates in terms of better theoretical training and higher prestige of public higher education institutions in employers evaluations.

Conclusions

In Romania, in 2009/2009 were registered 891.098 students out of which 480.239 students in the public sector and 410.859 students in the private sector (Report MERI, 2009:30). For these increasing numbers of students especially in the private sector, the quality assurance of the educational processes, recognition of learning outcomes on the labor market, financing and diploma recognition are crucial.

It is evident that ARACIS is just a part of a greater mechanism in the quality assurance regional and global system. However, becoming a full member of the global level of the quality assurance agencies represented by the INQAAHE, before becoming a full member of the European level of ENQA was quite a performance for ARACIS. Nonetheless, ARACIS is a full member of the intermediate level of the Central and Eastern Europe regional network of QA agencies: CEEN and the advancement through the European level of ENQA was just a matter of 16 years time, hard work and legislative adjustment to the ESG: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Certainly, there are common features and differences between ARACIS and other quality assurance agencies in the European region. The common purpose of becoming full members of ENQA brought a similar profile in mission, organizational structure, accreditation methodology and procedures for the majority of the European agencies.

Professional accreditation granted by national or international organizations for certain fields of specialization like business administration, economics, medicine or law remain important, although the legal requirements for accreditation indicate ARACIS as the national unique authority in the field of accreditation.

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