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Oana Sârbu is the Director of the General Direction of Academic Affairs in the University of Bucharest and has professional expertise in quality assurance in higher education. For more than 10 years she has coordinated the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) Experts Department, she was involved in many national and international projects considering QA in HE as well as many national and international evaluations. Between 2011 and 2013, she was appointed as Romanian Bologna Expert by the National Ministry of Education. Since 2013 she is an ENQA evaluator and member of various structures of ENQA: the Appeals and Complaints ENQA Committee, Internal Quality Assurance - ENQA Group or ENQA - Staff Development Group. She was involved in Development Group. She was involved in developing national and international strategies, methodologies and procedures in QA in HE, but also into monitoring the implementation of the proposed objectives.

Paper

Title: Quality assurance a tool for cooperation in HE and for fulfilling the threefold mission of the HEIs: A case study of the Romanian approach. Reflections on the Past, and the Prospects for the Future

Abstract

This paper **examines the evolution of regulations for Quality Assurance (QA)** in the Romanian Higher Education system **checking whether they foster a conducive environment for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to engage in cooperation at all levels** and **fulfil their threefold missions**: providing qualitative education, conducting impactful research and meaningfully engaging with the community.

The Romanian educational system was marked, in the post-COVID period, by significant legislative updates and policy initiatives which, among other things, **extended the dual educational system to the tertiary level**, provided **a full-length learning pathway for students in the vocational education** and **adopted the European Approach for Joint programmes**. This opens new opportunities for HEIs to address their missions. The expectation is that the QA system - policies and practices - should follow the lead and adapt to these changes to lead to quality improvement and accountability as well as act as information tools, compliance tools, or as a supranational quality tool. Therefore, the core of this analysis is **a comparative reflection of the new versus the old QA framework and tools**. It aims to highlight and **reflect on their changes, their compliance with the ESGs and the extent to which the new policies effectively recognize the involvement of HEIs in tertiary dual learning, in European alliances, in European Programmes, joint programmes, flexible learning pathways, hybrid mobility, micro-credentials, cooperative research projects, joint doctoral schools etc.**

This paper intends to stimulate discussions on how national policies and QA tools can ensure a comprehensive approach to quality and quality assurance, contributing to the discourse on the importance of HEIs realizing their threefold mission through rigorous QA practices. The findings underscore Romania's commitment to continuous improvement and alignment with European standards, offering insights for future QA developments in the region.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education (QA-HE) is recognized as essential for fostering institutional adaptability and educational improvement. QA involves a systematic, ongoing process that seeks to elevate educational quality by evaluating and refining internal procedures, aligning them with broader societal, technological, and institutional shifts. This process is critical to sustaining a culture of quality, ensuring that teaching and learning practices evolve in tandem with institutional missions and external expectations (UNESCO, 2004; Centrex, 2004).

As researchers in the field of educational policy, specifically in quality assurance mechanisms, our focus is on examining how Romania's QA system compares to international practices and recommendations. Moreover, our practical experience in implementing QA at the institutional level gives us insight into the challenges and opportunities for reforming national QA systems as well as institutional processes and practices. In this study, we aim to reflect on Romania's progress in QA, examining legislative changes, the involvement of stakeholders, and the integration of global standards. The insights drawn from this reflection offer a comparative analysis of the current QA processes against previous frameworks.

Therefore, this paper follows a structured approach: an introduction describing the context of our research, followed by a section dedicated to the history of quality assurance efforts in Romania. The next section analyses both the legislative framework for quality assurance and the university charters in an attempt to assess whether and how both national authorities and higher education institutions

have integrated values, international recommendations, and practices into their day-to-day activities. This analysis ends with a set of conclusions drawn from the research.

2. Context and Urgency of the Puzzle

Innovation is a key driver for overcoming the challenges faced by Romanian universities. The integration of digital technologies, the promotion of interdisciplinary research, and the strengthening of industry-academia collaboration are all vital for fostering growth and improvement. Internationalization is another crucial element in the future development of Romanian higher education. By attracting foreign students and engaging in global research networks, Romanian universities have the potential to enhance their global standing and contribute more significantly to the international knowledge economy.

Despite notable progress in addressing the threefold mission of universities—education, research, and societal engagement—Romanian higher education institutions (HEIs) still face significant challenges. Key obstacles include financial constraints, a shortage of skilled leaders in academic and QA roles, and inefficiencies due to frequent legislative changes. These issues underscore the need for both policymakers and researchers to collaborate on developing sustainable solutions.

Also, it is important to mention that in the context of the long-term agreement that HEIs could play a prominent role in the transformation towards a more sustainable world (Leal Filho, 2011), Romanian universities are increasingly aligning their efforts with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Just like HEIs around the world, Romanian universities are supporting the implementation of these goals through research, teaching and learning, partnerships, community engagement, governance and management (HESI, 2017), though still struggling to implement sustainability systematically in all their activities (Giesenbauer and Müller-Christ, 2020). Though lacking a plan or a SD policy as a foundation for their actions (like many other HEIs - according to Leal Filho et.al, 2020), Romanian universities are playing an important role in promoting sustainable practices and fostering a culture of sustainability among students and staff, to contribute to a sustainable future. They do so by integrating sustainability into their curricula, research agendas, and campus operations.

Recent improvements in the national QA system have increased stakeholder involvement, including students, employers, and international experts, ensuring a more inclusive approach to quality evaluation. However, challenges remain, particularly with respect to the frequent legislative changes and the large number of external evaluations required. These factors often hinder the development of long-term, sustainable strategies. Additionally, there are concerns surrounding the training of personnel responsible for implementing QA processes, both within universities and among external evaluators.

All these emerging trends and initiatives must be systematically integrated into the national quality assurance (QA) system, which should be equipped to recognize and incentivize the higher education institutions (HEIs) that actively contribute to the achievement of national educational objectives. The national QA framework—including its methodologies, standards, indicators, and practical applications—should explicitly reference key elements such as the tripartite mission of universities, the integration of digital technologies, interdisciplinary research, collaboration between industry and academia, and the contribution of HEIs to sustainable development. However, a critical question arises: does the current QA system adequately observe and promote examples of best practices in these areas? This issue becomes particularly pertinent in light of the ongoing public debate surrounding the reforms introduced by the new primary legislation in higher education (Law No. 199/2023). This paper aims to explore this complex issue, underscoring its urgency and relevance in the current educational policy landscape.

3. Historical Overview of Quality Assurance endeavours in Romania

Prior to 1989, quality assessment at the institutional level in higher education was virtually non-existent in Eastern European countries, including Romania. Universities had limited autonomy, and no formal mechanisms for quality evaluation were in place. The fall of communism in 1989 marked a pivotal shift, with the rapid establishment of private universities in Romania, often without even minimal quality control over their activities, which forced Romania to respond swiftly. In 1993, Romania became the first country in Eastern Europe to introduce the concept of "accreditation" as a mandatory requirement for the functioning of study programs (specializations). The National Council for Academic Evaluation

and Accreditation (CNEAA) was established to oversee this process, operating under the authority of the Romanian Parliament and funded by the state.

As a signatory of the Bologna Declaration, Romania became part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and committed to making quality assurance one of the main objectives of its higher education reforms. Consequently, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) was established in 2005, following the enactment of Government Emergency Ordinance No. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education, later approved by Law no. 87/2006 (referred to in this paper as the "2006 Methodology"), with subsequent amendments and completions. ARACIS was established as an autonomous public institution, with legal personality and self-financed. This marked the beginning of a new era for QA in Romania, with the introduction of internal QA mechanisms and the establishment of internal QA committees within universities to promote a quality-focused institutional culture.

Since its inception, ARACIS has continuously revised its external evaluation standards and performance indicators, with notable updates in 2006, 2017, and most recently in 2024. These revisions reflect an ongoing effort to align with international standards and respond to the evolving needs of the higher education sector. The 2024 revision, which follows the enactment of a new higher education law, represents a significant shift towards a more flexible and outcomes-oriented approach to QA and will become effective in 180 days after its publication on the 13th of August 2024.

4. Analysis of the External Evaluation Methodology

4.1 Analysing the way the methodologies reflect several aspects of the external evaluations

In alignment with the policies, decisions, and recommendations of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), ARACIS, in collaboration with the Romanian Ministry of Education, has developed the external quality assurance system. Over time, this system has evolved, adapting to new trends and international practices. This section examines the developments in stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance and the key stages of the external quality assurance process.

4.1.1 Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance (EQA)

Over the years, Romania's external QA methodologies have evolved to involve a broader range of stakeholders. The 2006 methodology primarily engaged academics and government representatives as they were directly responsible and involved in promoting legislation in the QA process. While students were included, their role was limited only to some processes. The 2017 methodology expanded student involvement in external evaluations and introduced representatives from the labour market and higher education unions, with particular emphasis on business sector involvement for engineering programs, due to ARACIS affiliation with ENAEE.

The 2024 methodology further broadens stakeholder participation, including students, labour market representatives, union members, and international experts in all QA processes, from evaluations to decision-making while the government representatives are still responsible for promoting legislation in the field and approving the QA agencies decision.

4.1.2 Evolution of External Evaluation Steps

The external evaluation process, as outlined in the 2005 methodology, included the following steps: accreditation (in two phases: provisional authorization and full accreditation), periodic external evaluations (every five years for accredited institutions), and follow-up procedures. Legislative changes introduced by the Law of National Education No. 1/2011 introduced the possibility that the external evaluations in Romania could be conducted either by ARACIS or by any agency registered with the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), marking a significant shift in Romania's QA landscape. This law also introduced the evaluation of doctoral programs, which became active in 2021 following the approval of Methodology for evaluation of doctoral studies and the systems of criteria, standards

and performance indicators used in the evaluation (approved through the Order no. 3651 of 12.04.2021 of the Minister of Education).

More recently, the Law of Higher Education no. 199/2023 introduced several new elements to the QA system, including the evaluation of post-graduate programs, the exclusive role of ARACIS in provisional authorization, and the external evaluation of joint programs following the European Approach to Quality Assurance. These developments necessitated a revision of the external evaluation methodology, which now incorporates indicators related to flexible learning pathways, dual education, micro-credentials, hybrid mobility, and cooperative research projects.

Nevertheless, we are aware that the HEIs undergo a larger range of external evaluations available/provided in the Romanian Higher Education system, between 2005 and 2024, besides the Institutional evaluation and accreditation. And **not all of these external evaluations are conducted by ARACIS**. The list of external evaluations available includes:

- Evaluation and accreditation of bachelor's degree programmes;
- Evaluation and accreditation of master's degree fields of study;
- Evaluation of doctoral education;
- Evaluation of post-university programmes;
- Evaluation of psycho-pedagogical training programmes for the teaching profession (DPPD);
- Evaluation of preparatory programmes for foreign students;
- Institutional classification (*which determines funding from the state budget*);
- Ranking of programmes;
- Evaluation of research;
- Audit of different managerial practices: such as ethics, financing, promotion in the teaching career etc.

For each of them the HEIs management and quality assurance committees and departments have to prepare specific reports or documents. Some of these evaluations consist in document verification, while others include site visits and interviews with internal stakeholders. Unfortunately, for the educational system, there is no unique platform to publish all the resulting reports or to gather them all for further analysis as a base for evidence-based policy making.

4.2. Indicator Analysis in the 2006, 2017, and 2024 Methodologies

Input - Process - Output indicators

In accordance with the OECD-INES framework, educational indicators can be classified into four categories: input, process, outcome, and context. Input indicators reflect the financial, human, and material resources available to institutions. Process indicators examine institutional practices such as access, participation, and organizational structure. Outcome indicators focus on student achievements, graduation rates, and employment outcomes. Context indicators relate to the broader demographic, social, and economic conditions influencing higher education institutions.

- **Input indicators:** Any indicator that examines the financial, human, and material resources of the higher education institution.
- **Process/system indicators:** Any indicator that checks whether the institution has established certain processes, procedures, or systems.
- **Outcome indicators:** Any indicator that evaluates outputs or outcomes. This category also includes indicators that require higher education institutions (HEIs) to have processes or procedures in place for monitoring outcomes such as graduation rates, drop-out rates, etc.

These indicators are based on a conceptual framework that portrays education as a productive system, where "inputs are transformed into outcomes" (Scherens et al., 2011, p.36). In this multilevel system, the context functions both as a source of inputs and constraints. It co-determines the definition of

desired outcomes and allows for situational adaptation to local conditions. There are also hierarchical processes and conditions that determine whether and how the expected outcomes are achieved.

With this framework in mind, we compared the three major external quality assurance (EQA) methodologies—2006, 2017, and 2024—from the perspective of several types of indicators, based on the model outlined above: input indicators, process indicators, outcome indicators. The table below illustrates the proportion of input, process, and outcome indicators in each methodology:

Tabel 1 Share of input-process-output indicators in 2006, 2017 and 2024 Methodologies (source: compiled by authors)

Type of indicator	Percentage in the 2006 Methodology	Percentage in the 2017 Methodology	Percentage in the 2024 Methodology
INPUT	60%	30%	5.5%
PROCESS/SYSTEM	30%	54%	89%
OUTPUT/OUTCOME	10%	16%	5.5%

Our analysis reveals a marked shift in the focus of QA indicators from input-heavy measures in the 2006 methodology to a greater emphasis on process and outcome indicators in 2024. This shift reflects the maturation of Romania's QA system, which is now better aligned with international standards and more responsive to the evolving demands of the higher education sector.

As observed, the 2006 methodology placed significant emphasis on input indicators, with 60% of the indicators focusing on resources such as financial and human inputs. In contrast, the 2024 methodology places far less emphasis on these indicators, reducing them to only 5.5%. Instead, the 2024 revision places a stronger focus on process indicators, which account for 89% of the total, compared to only 30% in 2006.

This shift towards process indicators signifies a broader change in how quality assurance is approached in Romania. Rather than simply measuring the resources that institutions have at their disposal, the focus is increasingly on the processes and systems that institutions implement to ensure quality education. This is consistent with international trends that prioritise dynamic and adaptive QA frameworks over static resource-based measures.

Prescriptive vs. Flexible Indicators

In addition to categorising the indicators by type, the methodologies were analysed to determine the degree of flexibility they afford to HEIs: prescriptive and flexible indicators. **Prescriptive indicators** are those that indicate clear and fixed characteristics of an element, not giving any space to the HEI to find its own way in implementing a certain standard. E.g. *‘the HEI must have for each specialisation at least 70% of the teaching positions filled by teachers with a full-time contract with the institution (titularizare) and at least 25% of them should be professors. The full-time teachers should cover more than 40% of the teaching positions’* (authorization indicator in the 2017 Methodology). While **flexible indicators** are those that only indicate the expected desiderate, leaving at the decision of the institutions how they reach that respective standard. The summative result of our analysis is presented in table 2.

Tabel 2 Share of prescriptive vs flexible indicators in 2006, 2017 and 2024 Methodologies (source: compiled by authors)

Type of indicator	Percentage in the 2006 Methodology	Percentage in the 2017 Methodology	Percentage in the 2024 Methodology
Prescriptive	60%	40%	36%
Flexible	40%	60%	64%

The results of this analysis indicate a clear trend towards flexibility, with the 2024 methodology providing even more room for institutions to meet standards in ways that align with their specific contexts. Flexible indicators rose from 40% in 2006 to 64% in 2024, reflecting the QA system's adaptation to the diverse needs of higher education institutions.

4.2.3 Complexity of Indicators

Last but not least, the complexity of the indicators was also assessed, with indicators classified as either simple or complex. Simple indicators are those that focus on a single element, while complex indicators require multiple actions or processes to meet the standard. The results of this analysis are presented in table 3.

Tabel 3 Share of simple/direct vs complex indicators in 2006, 2017 and 2024 Methodologies (source: compiled by authors)

Type of indicator	Percentage in the 2006 Methodology	Percentage in the 2017 Methodology	Percentage in the 2024 Methodology
Simple/direct	28%	50%	73%
Complex	72%	50%	27%

As illustrated, the 2024 methodology shows a significant increase in simple indicators (73%), in contrast to the more complex ones that dominated the 2006 methodology (72%). The reduction in complex indicators is likely intended to streamline the QA process and make compliance more straightforward for institutions.

4.3 Thematic Content Analysis of QA Methodologies (2006-2024)

Another level of our analysis of the three main quality assurance methodologies (2006, 2017 and 2024) is a thematic one - intended to check whether the reference methodologies foster a conducive environment for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to engage in cooperation at all levels and fulfil their threefold missions: providing qualitative education, conducting impactful research, and fostering community

To assess this we conducted a thematic content analysis of the texts of the three methodologies (2006, 2017, 2024) using the Simple Program for Instrumental Thematic Text Analysis (SPITTA) and allowed both for word counts and a thematic analysis (counting the occurrence of certain concepts). This analysis aimed to identify recurring themes, keywords, and concepts within the methodologies, particularly focusing on the extent to which they promote cooperation, innovation, and alignment with international practices.

In order to reach this desire, we developed a dictionary of relevant keywords and concepts drawn from the thematic focus of the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) and the established threefold mission of HEIs. The dictionary included terms related to cooperation, internationalisation, innovation, sustainability, and community engagement, which are critical themes in modern QA frameworks. SPITTA was used to perform a word count and thematic mapping across the three methodologies. The results of these concept mapping are presented in figures 1 and 2.

The analysis was guided by the assumption that the presence and frequency of specific terms within the QA documents reflect the emphasis placed on those concepts in policy and practice. For example, terms related to "international cooperation" or "European alliances" would indicate the degree to which the methodology encourages HEIs to engage with international partners, while terms such as "dual education" and "vocational training" would highlight the focus on industry collaboration and employability.

The results of the thematic content analysis are summarized in Table 4, figure 1 and figure 2 below, which present the frequency of key themes across the 2006, 2017, and 2024 methodologies:

Tabel 4 Frequency of occurrence of seven themes in the 2006, 2017, 2024 Methodologies (source: compiled by the authors)

Theme	Count in 2006 Methodology	Count in 2017 Methodology	Count in 2024 Methodology	Dictionary Element (EN)
1 cooperation	N=0	N=1	N=3	Cooperation, International, Collaboration, <u>European</u> , alliance, joint
2 <u>education</u>	N=2	N=12	N=17	Flexible, learning, mobility, credentials, study, education, academic, didactic, curriculum
3 research	N=	N=10	N=26	Research, project, conference, publish, article, journal, doctoral
4 <u>impact</u> for community	N=0	N=0	N=2	Community, society
5 dual <u>education</u>	N=0	N=0	N=1	Dual
6 vocational education	N=0	N=0	N=1	Vocational
7 <u>europa</u> n approach for joint programmes	N=0	N=0	N=2	Approach, integrated

The results summarised in table 4 show that the 2024 methodology has significantly increased its focus on international cooperation and European alignment, as evidenced by the inclusion of specific indicators related to European alliances, joint programs, and dual education.

Looking at these results one can observe that the 2024 methodology increased attention directed to international cooperation, European recommendations and practices. The new methodology is now checking whether HEIs are getting involved in european alliances and joint programmes and gives them credit for this in the external evaluation. A similar approach is observed as far as dual programmes and vocational education is concerned as the insertion of indicators referring to these specifically indicates that both the Ministry of Education and ARACIS consider these as priorities of the HE system. And the intention is to increase HEIs efforts to develop or get involved in such initiatives.

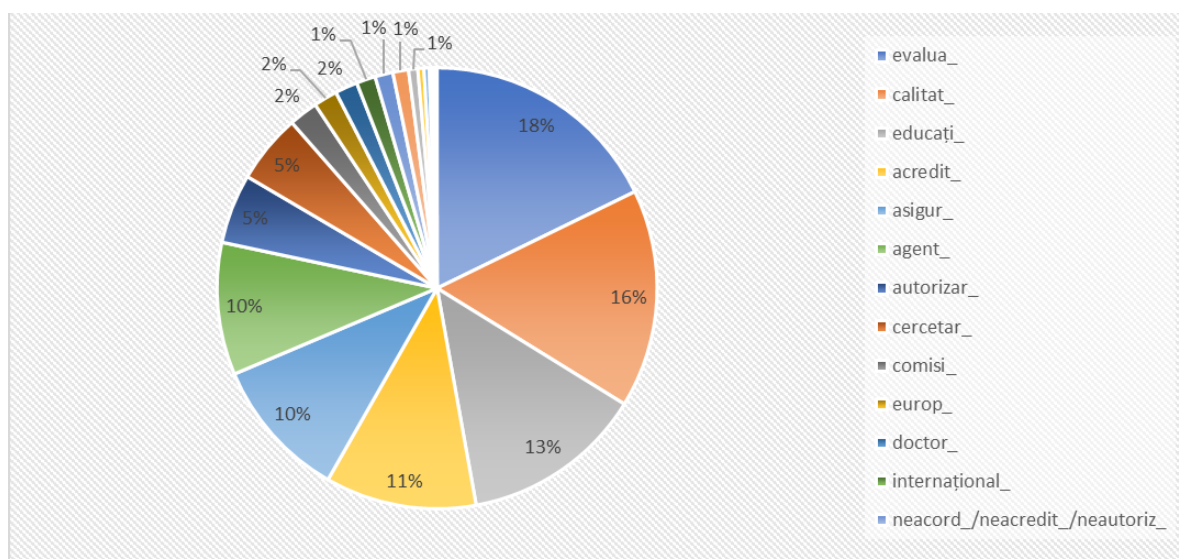


Figure 1 Word count result - concept representation in the 2006, 2017, 2024 Methodologies (source: compiled by authors)

Figure 1 highlights the fact that some concepts related to evaluations, education, accreditation, agency are still more frequent in the texts than internationalization of anything linked to not fulfilling the standards. The latter was an omission corrected in the 2024 Methodology since the previous two methodologies failed to explain what happened in the situation of one institution failing to meet the minimum standards during accreditation or during the periodical evaluations of an accredited institution.

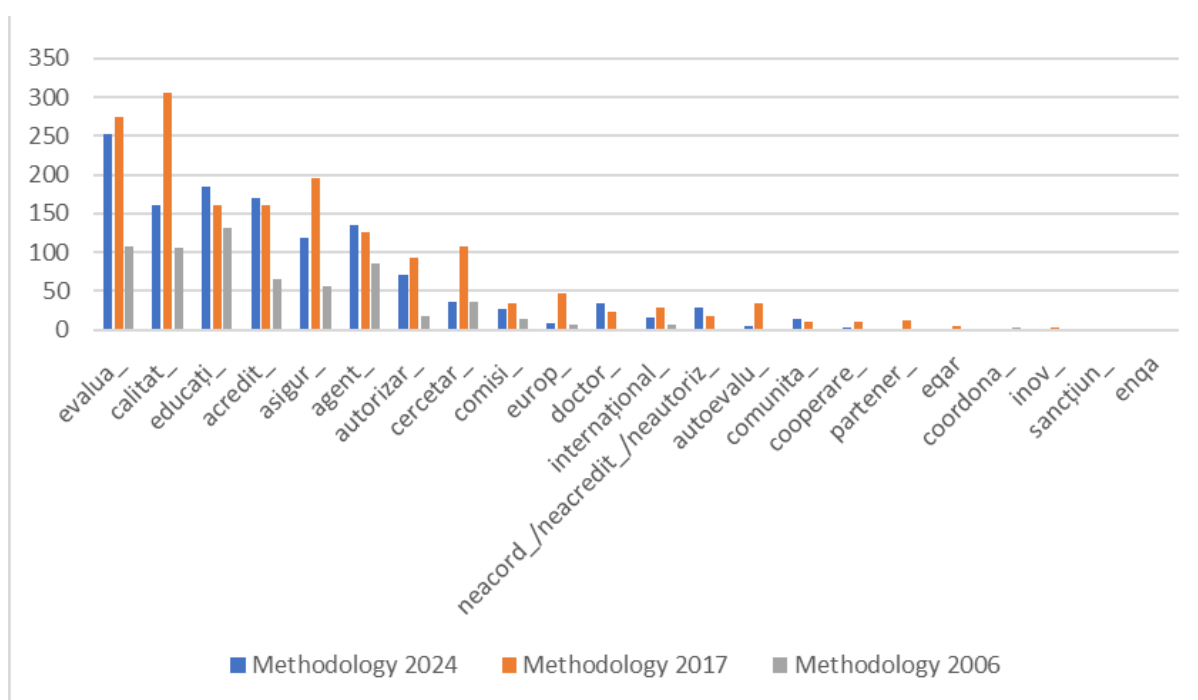


Figure 2 Word count result - spread of concepts across the 2006, 2017 and 2024 Methodologies (source: compiled by authors)

Figure 2 illustrates the varying frequency with which different concepts appear across the three methodologies, highlighting notable shifts in thematic focus. For instance, terms such as "coordination," "innovation," and "sanctions" are exclusive to the 2024 methodology, whereas terminology related to "education" is predominant in the 2006 methodology. This evolution in the language and corresponding indicators of the methodologies reflects the broader development of quality assurance (QA) practices over time. However, it is important to note that the intervals between these revisions—11 years between the first two updates and 7 years between the latter—may be too prolonged to effectively respond to

the rapid changes occurring within the field of education. While Ministers of Education reaffirm their commitment to Bologna Process objectives every two years, the QA systems themselves are subject to revisions only once per decade. This misalignment creates a perception of QA as a slow-moving mechanism, lagging behind the fast-paced evolution of educational needs and practices.

5 Analysis of University CARTAs in Relation to EHEA Principles

To assess the extent to which Romanian higher education institutions (HEIs) have integrated the principles, decisions, and recommendations of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) concerning quality assurance (QA), we conducted an analysis of the charters (CARTAs) of the nine largest comprehensive universities in Romania. This analysis focused on identifying the presence of key objectives that align with EHEA values, specifically those that reflect the broader educational, cultural, and societal missions of universities. The objectives we examined include:

- The advancement of national education, science, and culture;
- The preservation and dissemination of the values inherent in human culture and civilization;
- The promotion of free speech, critical thinking, scientific inquiry, and the renewal and enrichment of knowledge;
- The training and development of highly skilled human resources;
- The participation of Romanian science in the advancement of European and global scientific and cultural development;
- The promotion of national cultural identity alongside active participation in European integration;
- The development of Romanian society within a framework of democracy and the rule of law.

Our analysis indicates that these fundamental objectives are well reflected in the CARTAs of these institutions. The charters demonstrate a clear commitment to aligning the universities' missions with the principles of the EHEA, particularly in promoting the development of qualified human resources and advancing the integration of Romanian universities into the European academic and scientific community.

In this context, quality assurance plays a crucial role in fostering a continuous reflection on the values underpinning education, research, and knowledge transfer. Effective QA mechanisms should ensure that the educational system not only adheres to established standards but also nurtures an academic culture where quality is a collective responsibility. This responsibility is shared by all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and administrative staff.

The management of quality naturally integrates into the daily activities of academic departments, where students are encouraged to participate actively in the evaluation of teaching staff, and academic peers assess the scientific outputs of their colleagues. A robust culture of quality within universities is built on core values such as intellectual responsibility towards the community, a relentless pursuit of truth, academic freedom, a spirit of critical inquiry, and innovation. Moreover, it embodies a deep commitment to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge—from mentor to student, ensuring the continuity of academic traditions and the enrichment of the intellectual community.

Thus, the CARTAs reviewed confirm the alignment of Romanian HEIs with the EHEA's expectations, especially in promoting quality education, fostering critical thinking, and preparing students for their roles as informed, responsible citizens and contributors to the global knowledge economy.

6. Conclusions

The new ARACIS external evaluation methodology introduces a more flexible approach to QA, enabling universities to tailor their QA processes to their specific contexts and objectives. This shift aligns with UNESCO's (2004) definition of quality assurance as a systemic evaluation aimed at maintaining acceptable standards for education, scholarship, and infrastructure. The move towards flexible indicators allows institutions to develop strategies that are both context-specific and aligned with international benchmarks.

While the 2024 methodology marks significant progress, particularly in its support for internationalisation and flexibility, challenges remain. The numerous external evaluations required by Romanian legislation often create an additional administrative burden for universities, potentially detracting from the overall goal of enhancing educational quality. Ensuring that QA is seen as a tool for continuous improvement rather than mere compliance is essential for the sustained development of the higher education sector.

The methodology also supports and respects the internationalisation of Romanian universities, aligning with the European Approach to Quality Assurance for Joint Programs. A personal observation suggests that internal quality assurance systems tend to be more dynamic and responsive in addressing societal changes and identifying how universities should engage to achieve their quality assurance objectives, compared to external quality assurance systems.

However, despite the progress made, maintaining high standards of quality should not be perceived as an additional layer of bureaucracy or a mere accumulation of formal procedures. This is particularly challenging given the numerous external evaluations required by Romanian legislation, which can sometimes complicate compliance.

In conclusion, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of quality assurance (QA) practices in Romanian higher education, with particular attention to the integration of international standards and the shifting focus towards process-oriented and flexible indicators. By examining the legislative changes, stakeholder involvement, and the thematic development of QA methodologies, we have highlighted the progress made, as well as the ongoing challenges facing the Romanian higher education system. It is obvious that despite all efforts progress was made at a slow pace and the QA system took decades to change (with a medium period of 9 years between meaningful changes). One could argue in favour of a permanent monitorization of the implementation of QA processes and regulations as well as the changes in the international QA environment, to determine more frequent revisions of the QA system and practices.

Therefore, this study also opens the door for further inquiry, particularly in areas such as the impact of flexible QA frameworks on institutional innovation, the long-term sustainability of QA processes, and the role of international collaboration in enhancing educational outcomes but also HEIs involvement in society. Future research should explore these dimensions in greater depth, examining how evolving QA systems can better respond to the changing needs of universities and society at large and how we can design QA systems to keep the pace with all the technological changes. Through continued investigation and adaptation, quality assurance can remain a critical tool for ensuring that higher education institutions achieve their missions of providing excellence in education, research, and community engagement.

Annex 1. Dictionary (RO)

Dictionary element (RO)	Dictionary Element (EN)
Cooperare	Cooperation
Internațional_	International
Colabor_	Collaboration
European_	European
Alianță	alliance
joint	Joint
flexibil	Flexible
Învățământ	Learning
Studiu	Study
Învăț_ (învățare, învățării)	
Credit_	Credits
	Credentials
Curriculum	Curriculum
Mobilit_	Mobility
(mobilitate, mobilități)	
Didactic_	Didactic
Academic_	Academic
Educational	Education
Educaț_	
Flexibil	Flexibility
Cercetare	Research
Cercet_	scientific
Științific_	
Proiect	project
Conferință_	Conference
Public_	publish
Articol_	Article
Journal_	Journal
doctoral	doctoral
Comunitate	Community
societate	society
Dual	Dual
vocational	Vocational
Abordare	Approach
Integrat_	integrated

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