

STANDARDIZATION AS TOOL TO ENHANCE EDUCATIONAL ACCREDITATION

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ABSTRACT: Educational accreditation guarantees the quality of the educational processes, products and services. Both the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) in Bulgaria and Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) in Romania are members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). They follow strict professional standards, methodologies, procedures, and criteria. It is common that the quality management systems in universities are based on ISO 9001. The specific standard for educational organizations such as universities and research institutes ISO 21001 is far less popular than ISO 9001. The purpose of this paper is to highlight opportunities for improvement of the internal quality management systems of educational organizations based on international standards.

KEY WORDS: standardization; accreditation; ISO standards; National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA), Bulgaria; Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

1. INTRODUCTION

ISO 9001:2015 “Quality management systems — Requirements” is currently the most widely used international standard for management systems [1]. It is reviewed for relevance at five-year periods, and was last confirmed in 2021. Nevertheless, in November 2023 a decision was made to prepare a new project and in the near future to publish the sixth edition of ISO 9001.

The ISO 9001 standard is used as a basis for quality management systems in:

- local government;
- electoral organizations at all levels of government;
- the nuclear energy sector;
- the automotive sector;
- the railway sector;

- primary packaging materials for medicinal products;
- crop production, and even
- computer software.

The standard ISO 21001:2018 that focuses on educational organizations is also aligned with ISO 9001 and the High-Level Structure known as Annex SL to the ISO Directives [2].

This standard can be implemented together with the European Qualifications Framework and the European Quality Assurance Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) [3].

2. DISCUSSION

The discussion is based on an analysis of the national agencies in Bulgaria and Romania, and the possibilities for improvement offered by ISO standards.

2.1. National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) in Bulgaria

The NEAA in Bulgaria maintains a register of accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) that includes more than 50 universities and colleges, as well as scientific organizations such as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), the Agricultural Academy, several national centres and university hospitals [4]. They all are subjected to institutional and programme evaluation and accreditation, and consequently, to post-accreditation monitoring and control.

In the set of 10 ESG standards, there are 65 mentions of the term “quality”, 32 mentions of the term “assurance”, and 25 mentions of the term “system”. The 2015 edition of ESG states that “*The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation.*” [5]. There are three parts of ESG standards- for internal and for external quality assurance, and for quality assurance agencies, e.g., the NEAA, ARACIS, etc. Table 1 presents some key quotes that highlight the importance of quality in higher education [6]. One significant shortcoming of the existing ESG is the focus on quality assurance, and not on the wider concept of quality management. According to the terms and definitions specified in ISO 9000 [7]:

- **quality assurance** is a “part of quality management focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled”, and
- **quality management** “*can include establishing quality policies and quality objectives, and processes to*

achieve these quality objectives through quality planning, quality assurance, quality control, and quality improvement.”.

Yet another suggested enhancement is to focus on the continual improvement and the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle which is applied in a plethora of ISO-based management systems standards. ESG wrongly uses the phrase “continuous improvement” and this misalignment can easily be detected by referring to the table of contents of ISO 9001:2015 and its clause 10.3 “Continual improvement”.

A significant improvement of the understanding of a quality culture can be achieved if educational organization refer to ISO 10010 [8]. Similarly, to raise awareness and promote people engagement with the quality management system, ISO 10018 can be used for guidance [9].

Additional references to “quality assurance” in [5] can be found in:

- 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment;
- 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification;
- 1.6 Learning resources and student support;
- 1.7 Information management, and in
- 1.10 Cyclical quality assurance.

The quality assurance system required by the ESG has a smaller scope than a fully-fledged quality management system. This suggests a potential gap between the best practices based on ISO 9001 and/or ISO 21001, and the existing ESG standards. Thus, there is an opportunity for improvement of the ESG standards and their application in the HEIs.

Table 1. ESG standards for quality assurance.

ESG Standard	Statement	Guidelines	Criteria
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and	Policies and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the	1.1. HEI has a well-documented, publicly announced policy for quality assurance , with official status and accountability as part of the strategic management of the

	implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.	accountability of the institution. It supports the development of quality culture in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the policy has a formal status and is publicly available.	educational institution in the interest of public needs. 1.2. HEI maintains a system for internal quality assurance of education and teaching staff that includes the students' opinion.
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2.2. Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)

Being a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) meets all their criteria and is bound to trickle down their regulations to Romanian HEIs. Its procedures are transparent and prior to being evaluated universities can take advantage from the self-evaluation report guides for:

- Institutional evaluation;
- First Cycle (Bachelor) evaluation;
- Master evaluation;
- Doctoral Evaluation;
- Evaluation of departments for teacher training, as well as
- Evaluation of the preparatory year for Romanian language learning.

The international cooperation between ARACIS and its partner organizations enables increased compatibility and benchmarking opportunities. This is a crucial element in the assurance of global and European recognition of Romanian degree courses.

The proximity to Bulgaria, the common past, and the similar state of current political and economic development, including the EU integration, make the exchange of experience

and best practices with the NEAA even more desired and mutually beneficial.

2.3. ISO standards for educational organizations

It is not surprising that initially educational organizations developed, implemented and certified their quality management systems for compliance with the requirements of ISO 9001. Nevertheless, efforts were made to adapt these more general requirements to the specific of the processes of teaching, learning, and research. Consensus in the sector led to the publication of International Workshop Agreement-2 (IWA-2) “*Guidelines for the application of ISO 9001 in education*” in 2003, and later in 2007.

The co-existence with ISO 9001 continued till 2018 when the first edition of **ISO 21001** was published [2]. Overall, it is similar to ISO 9001, but several key differences have to be considered:

- There are 11 principles of an educational organization's management system (EOMS) in comparison to the well-known 7 quality management principles;
- Learning resource are added to Clause 7.1.6 “*Organizational knowledge*”;
- Clause 8 “*Operations*” has the biggest number of additional requirements compared to the ones in ISO 9001;
- Clause 9 “*Monitoring, measurement, analysis and evaluation*” is extended

with requirements for the satisfaction of learners, other beneficiaries and staff (9.1.2), other monitoring and measurement needs (9.1.3), and methods for monitoring, measurement, analysis and evaluation (9.1.4);

- Clause 10 “*Improvement*” has a new element – opportunities for improvement (10.3);
- There are 7 annexes specific for an EOMS.

More recently, in November 2021, a new project for an update in ISO 21001 was registered by the ISO Technical Committee 232 “*Education and learning services*”. Unfortunately, after commenting on the Committee Draft, in November 2022 the draft was referred back to the Working Group, and in April 2023 the project was cancelled. At the same time, a new working item was approved as a new project to update the existing ISO 21001 standard in line with the changes in the context of educational organizations.

After the beginning of November 2023, the monitoring of EOMS by national evaluation and accreditation agencies can be facilitated by applying the new technical specification **ISO/TS 21030:2023** [12]. This standard outlines the requirements for bodies providing audit and certification of educational organizations' management systems (EOMS). It is intrinsically linked to ISO 21001, and to the standard and principles for conformity assessment ISO/IEC 17021-1 [12]. ISO/TS 21030 specifies general, structural, resource, information, process, and management system requirements for certification bodies. The two normative, i.e., mandatory annexes:

- Annex A – *Determination of audit time*: audit duration on site (physical or virtual) from the opening meeting till the end of the closing meeting, audit planning and reporting, and audit travelling (if necessary);
- Annex B – *Specific knowledge and skills for certification functions in EOMS*. These competencies are classified according to the PDCA cycle and cover 11 competence areas, subdivided into 6 knowledge categories and 5 types of key skills:

- 1) Knowledge of educational management practices;
- 2) Knowledge of audit principles (e.g., ISO 19011), practices and techniques;
- 3) Knowledge of specific standards or normative documents for educational organizations and/or conformity assessment bodies;
- 4) Knowledge of certification body's processes;
- 5) Knowledge of client's educational subsector;
- 6) Knowledge of client's educational products and services, processes and organization;
- 7) Language skills appropriate to all levels within the client's educational organization;
- 8) Note-taking and report writing skills;
- 9) Presentation skills;
- 10) Interviewing skills;
- 11) Audit management skills.

In summary, the auditors from the national accreditation agencies should acquire these additional competences in order to demonstrate their professionalism, social responsibility, and to add value to the audited educational organization.

3. CONCLUSION

ISO 9001 remains the most popular international standard for quality management systems and serves as the backbone for building quality management systems in other domains.

ESG and the national evaluation and accreditation agencies can benefit from better alignment with the best practices in quality management concepts, methodologies, terminology, and tools in the ISO 9000 series of standards.

The standards ISO 21001 and ISO/TS 21030 are “the new normal” in the realm of quality management in the educational sector. The sooner the universities and accreditation agencies grasp these standards' principles, requirements and guidelines, the better chances of mutual benefits and sustained success they have.

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