External quality assurance in the time of COVID-19
Case examples from ENQA member agencies

Learning from each other is beneficial at any time. But even more so in times of crisis. The following case examples have been provided by ENQA members and affiliates to give insight and share experience on how external quality assurance agencies are adapting to the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions and challenges covered include dealing with legal obstacles for recognising online education and extending accreditation validity, moving site visits online, maintaining dialogue with stakeholders, and providing support and guidance to higher education institutions.

We would be delighted to receive additional examples from other agencies that are members or affiliates of ENQA. Contributions should be maximum 1 page and could cover the following topics:

- What were your agency’s immediate actions?
- Are you moving site visits online?
- Do you encounter any regulatory issues?
- What are you doing to directly support institutions?
- Other matters of strategic importance to your agency according to your context

Please send your contribution to Anna Gover (anna.gover@enqa.eu).

Resources can also be shared on social media under #QAfromHome.

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Latest update: 15 June 2020
AEQES – Belgium
Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, French speaking community in Belgium
May 2020

Since mid-March AEQES has postponed all site visits planned for the remainder of the academic year. This amounts to seven programme evaluations and four pilot institutional evaluations, representing 13% of our total expected site visit days for the year. These have been rescheduled for the end of 2020 due to uncertainty around the length of the lockdown measures in Belgium. This, in turn, has had a significant impact on the overall planning of our external quality assurance activities. Concretely, we decided to extend the pilot phase for institutional evaluations by an additional year so to spread the activities over that extended period. This is also in order to take into consideration the extra workload that the COVID-19 crisis has brought for higher education institutions.

Because the pilot phase for institutional evaluations was agreed by the Government and is written as an amendment in our legal framework, we had to make sure the Government would agree to this change, as well as taking considerable time to explain the new planning to individual higher education institutions.

At the back of our minds, we now realise that we may well have to re-plan everything again in the autumn if things are not yet back to normal. Thankfully, our higher education system is not based on accreditation, so we do not face problems of expiring accreditations or issues or recognition.

In the meantime, because 87% of the reviews for this academic year have been done, we are now fully occupied with supporting the experts in the production of their review reports. To reflect the pressure currently facing institutions, we have lengthened the time allowed for them to respond to their reports from three weeks to six weeks.

Simultaneously we are reflecting on if and how to perform virtual visits: Are these possible? Desirable? Negotiable? Besides convincing reluctant experts or institutions, we also have to consider thorny issues such as how to guarantee the confidentiality of the virtual conversations and how to organise the proper consultation of additional documents.
AIC – Latvia
Academic Information Centre, Latvia
June 2020

What were your agency’s immediate actions?
AIC issued a statement and informed all experts and higher education institutions (HEIs) individually about postponing the planned assessment procedures of study directions until a later date. The statement was also published on the AIKA website, available in Latvian and English. In addition, AIC did not conclude any new agreements about assessment of study directions. Meanwhile, the possibility of moving the site-visit for other procedures to online environment was discussed and decided upon.

Are you moving site visits online?
AIC moved online the site visits for licensing of study programmes and assessing changes to accredited study directions. After a short trial period, the site visits took place by using Zoom. Zoom was chosen as the best solution as it allows for up to 100 participants to join the meeting and provides useful tools such as waiting room, screen sharing etc. Other procedures have not been moved online due to their complexity and length of the site visit.

Do you encounter any regulatory issues?
The main issue was that according to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education a number of study directions had to be accredited by 31 December 2020. When the restrictions caused by COVID-19 outbreak came into force, it became evident that this will not be possible if the current methodology has to be applied and all requirements of the regulatory framework have to be fulfilled. This has been resolved by amendments to the Law that postpone accreditation deadlines for all study directions by half a year. AIC is currently in process to ensure that the procedure for the assessments taking place this year is prolonged and aligned with the accreditation deadline.

The regulatory framework also requires the assessment of material and technical base of study programmes. Usually this is organised by an on-site tour and inspection of the HEI’s premises, including laboratories, library and any special equipment relevant for the study programme. Given that two procedures were moved online a workaround had to be found. In this case we asked the HEIs to replace the on-site tour with a similar activity online (video tour, presentation with photos etc.).

What are you doing to directly support institutions?
AIC provided support to HEIs by individually contacting every HEI and consulting them about the impact on their quality assurance procedures. AIC also reassured them that the situation caused by COVID-19 and the solutions applied by the AIC will not affect the outcome of assessment procedures. Also, AIC emphasised that the actions taken by HEIs to overcome the COVID-19 period are commendable and do not have to be reported as formal changes to study programmes.

Other matters of strategic importance to your agency according to your context
The emergency period has allowed time to re-think the current practice and become better prepared for the number of assessments to follow. AIC is currently reviewing the possibility of moving some elements of assessment procedures to online mode, for example, the expert training before the site visit or the meetings with people located in different cities. However, the current practice shows that it would not be possible to move all assessment procedures online and to have the same outcome as for on-site procedures. In our opinion quality assurance is about enhancement, support and building trust and this can be better achieved by personal contact.
How AQUA is handling the consequences of the pandemic

What were your agency’s immediate actions?
AQUA closed its office at the moment when the Government of Andorra decreed the state of emergency. Fortunately, 90% of AQUA’s work was already prepared for telecommuting because it was already a part of our structure. Thus, our efficiency was not affected.

AQUA cancelled all the face-to-face activities scheduled (like meetings and seminars). Most of them were rescheduled or developed online.

AQUA adopted a flexible work schedule to meet the needs of the current program evaluations.

AQUA offered support and guidance to the higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

AQUA informed stakeholders through our social media, web and telephone of these adaptations.

AQUA published a statement on COVID 19 on our website and social media.

Are you moving site visits online?
During the period of the lockdown, we did not have site visits scheduled. We have one in July and we have adapted it to carry it out online.

Do you encounter any regulatory issues?
We have not encountered any regulatory issue yet.

What are you doing to directly support institutions?
Firstly, we offered support and guidance to the rectors and the representatives of quality assurance of each higher education institution of Andorra; and also to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

AQUA has a permanent working group on quality assurance, in which representatives of each higher education institution and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education participate. We scheduled periodic online meetings during the lockdown with the aim of discussing and sharing concerns about the current adaptations due to the coronavirus. As a result of these meetings, AQUA, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the two universities of Andorra published a joint statement on COVID 19.
Strategy for action of AQU Catalunya in the exceptional circumstances resulting from the effects of SARS-COV-2 coronavirus

Context and AQU's Contingency Plan
Royal Decree 463/2020, 14 March, whereby a state of emergency was declared to deal with the public health crisis situation due to COVID-19, provides for the suspension of administrative deadlines for the handling of procedures by public sector entities in Spain.

It is important to remark that the conditions at the present time and during the coming months will make in-person assessment and the safety of all those taking part in the assessment procedure extremely complicated. AQU Catalunya is therefore planning and carrying out site visits via videoconferencing for all faculties, schools and programmes that submitted self-assessment reports according to the planned timetable, wherever this is possible and taking into account the opinion of the universities involved.

AQU Catalunya activated its Contingency Plan whereby, as of 16 March 2020, all of the Agency’s activities are now being undertaken online.

Guidance to higher education system
AQU Catalunya has prepared different documents in order to provide guidance to higher education sector:

- Considerations of AQU Catalunya on the state of emergency and teaching in higher education (12 May 2020)
- Protocol for action for the accreditation of recognised degree programmes (12 May 2020)
- Protocol for action in the VSMA Framework due to the effects of the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus (12 May 2020)
- VSMA framework actions by AQU Catalunya due to the effects of SARS-COV-2 coronavirus (13 March 2020)

Programme accreditation and IQAS certification
All site visits will be undertaken by way of video link from March to December 2020. It is important to mention that AQU Catalunya ensures the same quality of the assessment procedure and results won’t be affected by the online format. Training sessions are important in order to explain the new format of the site visit. AQU Catalunya has already trained 44 experts.

AQU Catalunya has already finished 5 site visits at programme level which include the assessment of 9 degree programmes. It is worth mentioning that before summer AQU Catalunya has planned 3 site visits linked to IQAS certification and 13 more at programme level.

Perceptions of virtual site visits
Universities participating in this new format were a little bit sceptical with the new format and worried about the possible impact of the procedure on the result of the programme accreditation. This perception has changed after having the experience and they show their satisfaction to AQU Catalunya through informal channels.
Hungarian Accreditation Committee operations during the COVID-19 lockdown

The pandemic reached Hungary on 4 March 2020, when the first cases in the country were announced. The first Coronavirus (COVID-19)-related deaths were reported on the government’s official website on 15 March 2020. Already on March 7, the government announced the cancellation of all public events including the ceremonies of Hungary’s national holiday on 15 March 2020 and a state of emergency was instituted on 11 March 2020. Already some ten days prior to that, the president of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) asked all Board and staff members who had travelled in the past two weeks not to come to the HAC offices. From March on, all meetings were cancelled and staff began to work from home on 12 March 2020. On 18 March 2020, the surgeon general announced that the virus had spread to every part of the country.

Since then, the HAC has implemented online Board meetings, expert committee meetings and site visit interviews online via Microsoft Teams. All meeting participants are provided with data protection information that they have to accept and return online. The HAC has for many years conducted its monthly Board meetings via its TIR (HAC’s Information System) database, where all documents are uploaded and a secure platform enables voting. Meeting participants have received access to TIR after they had submitted their IP codes to the system manager who enabled personal access to the meeting-related documents and the actual voting platform of TIR available from the member’s home or office. Every meeting was assisted by the HAC technical staff and went surprisingly smoothly from the start on.

All participants of the online meetings received a guide with very detailed technical instructions, not only for how to use the online tool but also how to access documents, how to vote, how persons with conflicts of interest with the case being discussed would be excluded from access and vote during discussions of that case, and similar information, prior to the meetings. The relevant section in the HAC procedural regulations was amended to include online meeting and voting procedures. For site visit interviews the programme officer in charge prepares the minutes of the meeting based on a template, which includes technical information related to the online process, including the legal disclaimer concerning audio recordings of the meetings.

Addressing higher education institutions and the public, the HAC president published a Statement on procedures carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic on 31 March 2020 in both Hungarian and English. For upcoming site visits of institutions or doctoral schools – the two important ex post evaluations performed in every fifth year – were asked about their availability for online “site visits” with the various groups to be interviewed. The students of doctoral schools were not interviewed online; rather they were sent an online questionnaire with questions touching all important issues related to doctoral school’s ESG compliance. Furthermore, all traditional contact options (e.g. phone, e-mail), are available in order to secure the information change and consultations between the programme officers and institutions, doctoral schools, Board members and expert committee chairs and members.
What were your agency’s immediate actions?
NCPA has discussed the current situation with the staff and the founders of the agency, took into account ENQA statement on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality assurance agencies, studied foreign experience and moved to remote activities.

NCPA developed methodological materials (guidelines for HEIs, experts and NCPA coordinators) and launched online accreditation.

Are you moving site visits online?
NCPA carries out online accreditation using the ZOOM platform which enables to involve up to 100 participants and meets technical requirements to ensure the quality of expertise.

Do you encounter any regulatory issues?
The Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Russian Federation has issued a series of orders and recommended that HEIs cancel face-to-face classes and resort to distance learning. So NCPA is working according to the current legislation.

What are you doing to directly support institutions?
Firstly, NCPA studied best practices (US, Europe and Asia-Pacific region) and posted thematic analysis on the website. These materials are open to HEIs and cover such topics as International practice of switching to e-learning during COVID-19, Higher education and COVID-19, US Higher Education and COVID-19. So institutions can familiarise themselves with the materials in the public domain on NCPA official website.

Secondly, NCPA advises HEIs remotely upon request.

Other matters of strategic importance to your agency according to your context
Higher education assessment system is likely to change and become more flexible using combination of both site-visits and online expertise. Distant tools will be developed further and best practices can be affectively used to carry out evaluation activities.
With the pandemic outbreak the NCEQE shifted to online delivery of its activities as of 16 March 2020. One institutional evaluation was carried out partially online, with close collaboration between the institution and the NCEQE. We identified the programmes for which we could conduct accreditation visits via virtual methods. Currently, where possible follow-up activities too are carried out using desk-based methods and online means. Considering the online format, a greater focus is now made on supporting peer reviewers through additional guidance related to online interviews. Even though institutions are keen to undertake evaluations in an online or partially online format, the NCEQE has initiated the adaptation of accreditation timelines for programmes and institutions where conducting physical site visits are paramount. This particularly relates to programmes in medicine and to institutions that have programmes in medicine, as well as to programmes which involve laboratory and clinical training and work-based study components. In other cases the NCEQE will continue conducting virtual and partially virtual evaluations where possible until restrictions are lifted. A virtual format will be used for training of experts, as well as for training for institutions on writing the self-evaluation reports.

Another immediate action that the NCEQE undertook with the pandemic outbreak was related to supporting institutions in shifting to online teaching and learning (T&L) considering the emergency conditions. The majority of institutions started shifting to online T&L from 16 March 2020. However, as institutions in Georgia do not have much experience in online education, we deemed it important to develop recommendations and guidance for ensuring quality of online education provision and online learning; this also included guidance on securing students’ rights and ensuring the student-centredness, relevance and reliability of e-assessments. In this process while considering the local context, the NCEQE largely reflected on the framework for the quality assurance of e-assessment developed through the TeSLA project, and the report on considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision developed by the ENQA working group on quality assurance and e-learning. Currently we are working to identify ongoing challenges in online education quality assurance and we are going to contribute to analysis and reflection of the situation of online T&L, to better support overcoming the crisis and quality of online and distance higher education in Georgia. For this the NCEQE also plans to facilitate discussion and sharing of experiences among institutions on best practices of online education quality assurance.

The NCEQE will probably think of ways of retaining alternative ways of communication and virtual visits (where possible) even after pandemic and will seek to drive innovation in its external quality assurance procedures for further enhancement of methodologies that are fit for purpose.
QAA operates several different quality review approaches, including different methodologies in Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland because Higher Education is devolved to the different administrations within the UK. Since mid-March QAA has completed quality review activity where this could be carried out by desk-based methods, but has postponed all planned in person, physical, site visits for the remainder of the academic year. These in person visits have been rescheduled. Some quality review visits in England have been able to be undertaken via virtual means, with close collaboration between the providers, regulator and QAA. Given the likelihood that some degree of social distancing will still be required, we are developing all of our quality review visit methodologies so that they can possibly be undertaken either in whole or in part through virtual methods. We recognise this will be challenging and are particularly keen to ensure that the opportunities for exchanging views and the richness of dialogue more typical of in person visits will be realised irrespective of the mode of review. In view of this we are actively considering which aspects of review visits might best be carried out in person should some restrictions be lifted.

Regulators (and equivalent bodies) in the UK have recognised that institutions need to focus on planning for the new academic year and delivering a high-quality experience for students. However, they are also keen to see reviews undertaken again in the Autumn.

QAA has provided guidance to the HE sector on a wide range of immediate issues. This guidance is available on the QAA website. The guidance and supporting resources include:

- Initial Guidance for HE Providers on Standards and Quality
- Thematic Guidance – Practice and Lab-based assessment
- Thematic Guidance – Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement
- Thematic Guidance – Accelerated Degrees
- Thematic Guidance – Work-based learning
- A range of supporting materials to support good practice in online delivery and engaging and supporting students
- A scan of international policy and practice
- ‘No detriment’ policies: an overview of intended impact
- Arguments for and against including a ‘COVID-19 Statement’ on degree transcripts
- Academic integrity in digital delivery

In addition, QAA has established a discussion forum for providers and stakeholder agencies and run a well subscribed series of webinars and online events to share practice and promote discussion.
Handling the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

What were your agency’s immediate actions?
The Board wrote to all the rectors to communicate a consistent message about the Board’s awareness of the effects of the pandemic on the universities and its commitment to work with the sector to find mitigating solutions (https://qef.is/news-events/sample-news-article-4/). All reviews after mid-March were postponed. Board meetings and meetings with stakeholders have continued online. The Board Secretariat conducted phone interviews with Quality Managers of all the universities in mid-April to gather information about each university’s responses to the pandemic, with a special emphasis on teaching and assessment.

Are you moving site visits online?
At the present time, there are no plans to conduct site visits online. However, that may change if travel restrictions continue to be in effect into the Autumn months of 2020.

Do you encounter any regulatory issues?
No. The Icelandic higher education system is not based on temporary accreditation, and there are no specifications in the regulatory framework about whether a review must include a physical site visit. Any arrangements for online visits would have to be decided with the universities, and through consultation with National Union of Icelandic Students and the Ministry.

What are you doing to directly support institutions?
Each Board member meets annually with the management team and student representatives of one or two universities to take stock of, and discuss, recent developments, including those related to the quality enhancement agenda. This year, all meetings will be online and are scheduled for June. In addition to the regular agenda, the discussion will also cover the university’s response to the health crisis, key lessons, planning for the next academic year and any changes to the long-term strategic development. These meetings involve open discussion of strengths and weaknesses, as well as feedback from Board representative on the university’s quality enhancement agenda. Information gathered in these meetings will also be discussed in the subsequent Board meeting and further support will possibly be provided in the light of identified sector-wide issues.

Further support to the universities is provided via the Quality Council (QC), an advisory body to the Quality Board comprised of all the universities’ Quality Managers and two representatives of the National Union of Icelandic Students. A Secretariat member attends the QC meetings as an observer. The QC serves as a forum for resource sharing across the universities, and the Secretariat has used that forum to keep track of shared issues across the university sector and communicate European and international developments in quality assurance.