



European Association for  
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

## 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](mailto:anna.gover@enqa.eu)).

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

## Contents

AEQES – Wallonia, Belgium.....	3
AIC – Latvia .....	4
AQUA – Andorra.....	5
AQU Catalunya – Spain.....	6
HAC – Hungary .....	7
NAA – Russia .....	8
NAQA – Ukraine.....	9
NCPA – Russia.....	10
NCEQE – Georgia.....	11
NVAO – Flanders, Belgium .....	12
QAA – United Kingdom .....	14
QQI – Ireland .....	15
Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education – Iceland.....	17
ÜKA – Sweden.....	18

**Latest update: 1 July 2020**

## AEQES – Wallonia, 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 AICA 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.

## HAC – Hungary

### Hungarian Accreditation Committee, Hungary

May 2020



### 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?**

Due to the spread of the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19) in the country, the Government issued a Decree on conversion of all accreditation and quality assurance procedures into electronic format. From April 2020 to the present day, the accreditation procedure of educational programmes is conducted in electronic format with remote involvement of both local and international experts. Prior to each review, the Agency's staff assist online expert groups on any technical issue.

**Are you moving site visits online?**

As of 30 March, all expert visits to the site were cancelled and external reviews were conducted only remotely. During this period, more than 40 accreditation and quality assurance reviews were conducted electronically.

**Do you encounter any regulatory issues?**

For the last three years, with the recent changes in State accreditation legislation, the accreditation procedure was already gradually shifting to electronic format. New electronic form was developed in the State Accreditation Information System (SAIS). Personal accounts of educational organisations and experts were established in SAIS, and experts and higher education institution staff were trained to work in these conditions.

**What are you doing to directly support institutions?**

The validity of state accreditation of higher education institutions expiring between 15 March 2020 and 1 January 2021 was automatically extended for one year. On the regular basis, NAA conducts webinars for educational organisations to explain the status of accreditation in COVID-19 pandemic conditions.

**Other issues of strategic importance to your agency according to your context**

Based on the results of operation during the lockdown, and taking into account the experience of implementing educational programmes with the use of e-learning and distance learning technologies, the forms and methods of electronic procedures will be further improved. Mechanisms for remote biometric identification of learners during the implementation of activities on the assessment of the quality of education will be developed.



## NAQA – Ukraine National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, Ukraine June 2020



### **What were your agency's immediate actions?**

In Ukraine the quarantine was announced on 12 March 2020 and all public events were prohibited. NAQA reacted immediately: all the staff started to work remotely, the internal meetings of NAQA members and Secretariat have been transferred online and held on a regular basis, all routine work has been conducted as planned. NAQA also made a decision to develop a procedure for virtual site-visits and ensure online accreditations.

### **Do you encounter any regulatory issues?**

During the first two weeks of the nationwide quarantine NAQA has developed a Temporary Procedure for Accreditation Site-visit Using Technical Means of Video Communication. Later the Ukrainian Government decision on online accreditation appropriateness and validity was adopted.

### **Are you moving site visits online?**

Yes, from 26 March until 1 June 2020 about 300 online accreditations have been successfully completed. Preliminary and final briefings of expert panels, site visits, communication with stakeholders, university administration, meetings of sector expert councils - all this takes place online now. Moreover, all stakeholders and participants of the process note that the quality of accreditation expertise remains high. 78% of experts confirmed that outcomes of the online evaluations are the same or even better than of the face-to-face ones.

### **What are you doing to directly support institutions?**

To ensure support and effective communication with stakeholders, NAQA has launched a number of public relations projects via the NAQA [website](#) and [Facebook](#) page (NAQA's School of Quality, NAQA comments, NAQA advises, NAQA Weekly Online Webinars etc.). Every week, NAQA accredits, recommends, prompts, comments, advises and informs everyone who is interested in higher education quality. NAQA speakers regularly hold open webinars and answer numerous questions that concern the academic community.

### **Other matters of strategic importance to your agency according to your context**

One more important issue is international communication and cooperation. During the quarantine a [number](#) of consultations, webinars and meetings were held online with foreign colleagues, including those from France, Lithuania, Sweden, Belgium, Estonia, Cyprus, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. On 3 June 2020 there was [online ceremony](#) of signing a memorandum of cooperation between NAQA and NCEQE (Georgia). NAQA representatives also took part in the QAA International Partners Forum and in online [evaluation](#) visit within the framework of the ERASMUS+ EDUQAS project by technical means of video communication. International cooperation is of a great value especially in such difficult and unprecedented times.

## NCPA – Russia

### National Centre of Public Accreditation, Russia

June 2020



#### **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.

## NCEQE – Georgia

### The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, Georgia

June 2020



NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
EDUCATIONAL QUALITY  
ENHANCEMENT

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.

## NVAO – Flanders, Belgium

### Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders, Flanders, Belgium

June 2020



#### What NVAO Flanders has learned from a pandemic crisis

In response to the lockdown in Belgium, the Flemish Department of NVAO suspended its assessment procedures for an indefinite period. From then on, all meetings were cancelled and staff began to work from home.

And although we had no specific plan ready to deal with such a crisis, we were prepared to face the challenges in consultation with the sector. Our agency staff have not been sitting idle.

#### First experience with Flemish online assessments

Previously, we had no extensive experience with online site visits, apart from some online experiences in assessment procedures abroad. In a number of exceptional cases, (parts of) the dialogue between assessment panels and programmes (institution) were nevertheless organised online during the lockdown period. From these pilot procedures we have learned the following lessons:

- The dialogue went very smoothly for everyone.
- Online conversations require a more thorough preparation in terms of content and should be more directed than regular site visits.
- The people the panel talks to online also used the chat function to provide further additions to questions and responses. This is something to coordinate well in advance.
- The participants evaluated the online dialogue as equally efficient in terms of content as a regular site visit, and much more efficient in terms of global time use and travelling.
- The recording option (sound and / or image) is an additional advantage for reporting. Although, with GDPR in mind, this requires explicit permission beforehand and clear communication about when the recording will be deleted.

#### Never waste a crisis

This pandemic crisis gave us time to reflect, together with other European quality assurance agencies, on how we can design our procedures to be future-proof, responding to the challenges we are facing.

Today, therefore, we are updating our assessment frameworks. We want frameworks to focus rather on the main goal of a site visit, namely organising a dialogue between the external panel of experts and the programme/institution, rather than focussing mainly on the form.

If an assessment panel can rely on findings from a site visit that was carried out in the context of another assessment procedure or if they are of the opinion that a physical site visit offers no added value, they can decide not to carry out a (new) site visit. Instead, the panel can organise a dialogue with the programme (institution) via a (series of) online conversation(s). The combination of a site visit and online conversations is also possible, for example to speak to certain stakeholders for whom physical presence is difficult.

## **Hybrid assessments: online and on site**

Although restrictions are being gradually relaxed in Belgium and we restarted our review processes in Flanders on 8 June 2020, higher education will probably never quite be the same again. As we emerge from this crisis, reflection is still needed. Therefore, we deliberately continue to redesign our way of working. Prior to the lockdown we were already developing a new training programme for panel members with two distinct parts: an online, content-focused part and a real-life roleplaying and skills part. In response to the crisis, we swiftly pivoted and developed a complete online training platform.

Furthermore, we now see online dialogues as an additional tool in our toolkit for assessment procedures. And though site visits remain a requirement for most procedures; we do have other procedures that can be organised online (e.g. change in study load). Between these extremes we mainly see possibilities for hybrid assessments: a combination of online and on site. In doing so, we first of all assume that parts of the procedure can go online where it has an added value (e.g. first introductory meeting of the panel of experts and the dialogues with alumni, representatives of professional field). This allows the actual site visit to have a clearer focus. And secondly, we acknowledge that even in actual site visit meetings, some of the participants may take part online.

## QAA – United Kingdom

### Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom

May 2020



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.



## QQI CINNTE Pilot Virtual Institutional Review Visit

### Background

QQI's CINNTE institutional review cycle has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 public health restrictions, with the initial immediate postponement of institutional reviews scheduled for spring 2020. The schedule is being revised and it remains the intent to complete the current cycle of institutional reviews for all publicly regulated HEIs by 2023. A pilot virtual institutional review of [Institute of Technology, Carlow](#), commenced on 10 June 2020. This short paper summarises the key stages in the pilot process, the lessons learned and next steps in this development.

### Planning and Preparation

- There was detailed planning and engagement between QQI, the HEI and the external review team in advance of commencing the virtual visit. The visit timetable was adapted for a virtual environment by splitting it into themed blocks distributed over a longer number of days.
- Detailed guidance for all meeting participants on MS Teams (the platform agreed) and meeting etiquette were developed.
- A student-led briefing for student participants was organised and conducted virtually by the National Student Engagement Programme. Feedback confirms the briefing was very positively received.

### The Virtual Review Visit

- An all-day private review-team meeting space was created each day to be used for (an increased number of) review team meetings. Review team members could join the space at any point in the day. The review team also set up their own WhatsApp group to allow private communication (of non-sensitive topics).
- All online meeting links were set-up by QQI and added to the main review visit timetable, then shared with the review team and the institutional coordinator. The institutional coordinator was responsible for sharing the meeting links with HEI representatives and external stakeholders, avoiding any GDPR issues and allowing the HEI to monitor and coordinate responses.
- A QQI support person was allocated to each meeting session to admit attendees and assist in monitoring. QQI support did not participate in the meetings, and kept camera and microphone turned off throughout.

### Lessons Learned to Date

- The planning and work for this virtual review has gone very well. A very engaged and proactive HEI and review team has been very positive in this regard. The virtual process requires detailed planning and preparation by all parties – but not necessarily more than is needed for on-site visits.
- It is essential to communicate regularly with the team and the HEI to determine if amendments to the process are required. To date, feedback has been broadly positive with only minor technical issues: Communication between review team members has been very good and there is a good team dynamic.
- HEIs that have not yet undergone review have indicated some challenges in respect of conducting the self-evaluation process within current restrictions. There is also some

concern from HEIs on the authenticity of the virtual process, however, the pilot experience to date is very reassuring in this regard.

### **Next Steps**

- The pilot institutional review process is still in progress. It has been very helpful in testing the virtual methodology and in informing a framework of procedures and protocols for future application. There are two further virtual institutional reviews planned in 2020.
- Following this pilot, QQI will evaluate the process and guidelines and will develop a broader framework of procedures for conducting virtual reviews. If, as is expected, public health restrictions remain in place for some time, the review team training process and planning visits will also be adapted. It would be neither feasible or desirable to suspend the current review cycle and process indefinitely.
- QQI will engage with the remaining HEIs scheduled for review, particularly those scheduled for review in 2021 and early 2022 and will develop a revised process and schedule in consultation with the HEIs and sector.



## 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.

In the middle of March, as Swedish higher education institutions closed their campuses and transferred to distance teaching and learning, UKÄ moved all panel meetings and site visits within ongoing external quality assurance activities online. UKÄ employees have been working from home during the same period. Other immediate actions involved training all UKÄ staff in using different digital platforms, and discussions on how to set up online meetings. Very few of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities have thus been postponed. As an example, online site visits for nine institutional reviews have been conducted. Presently, we are gathering feedback from higher education institutions and experts on their participation in UKÄ's online activities.

Initial direct support to institutions, student organisations and individual students included, for example, updated information on the UKÄ website. The agency saw an increase in questions about legal matters with regard to changes in programme and course curricula, the possibility to postpone courses and online examinations.

In 2019, a group of senior staff were assigned the task to monitor areas of interest to UKÄ in a more systematic way than before. During spring 2020, this group has met on a weekly basis and provided reports to the agency management on developments and challenges in the higher education sector due to Covid-19.

Further, the current events have provided many opportunities for peer learning, and UKÄ has participated in informal discussions with colleagues in other countries and agencies, sharing hands-on experience of online meetings and site visits.