

ENQA protocol for online site visits due to force majeure

Introduction

The protocol for online site visits of ENQA Agency Reviews provides guidance to introducing the online site visits due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the protocol is used for any other situation of force majeure that make a physical site visit impossible at a short notice. The protocol preserves and guarantees the consistency of ENQA Agency Reviews by reinsuring that the review principles of ENQA Agency Reviews remain respected (chapter 2.2 of the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews):

1. “The review is an evidence-based process carried out by independent experts.
2. The information provided by the agency is assumed to be factually correct unless evidence points to the contrary.
3. The review is a process of verification of information provided in the self-assessment report (SAR) and other documentation and the exploration of any matters which are omitted from that documentation.
4. The process is transparent, and outputs are published.
5. The level of conformity with the ESG required for ENQA membership is that of “overall compliance”, not rigid adherence.” (p. 6)

The protocol

Should the panel members be unable to travel due to the Covid-19 pandemic, or the agency under review could not host and/or organise the visit on-site due to national or other restrictions related to Covid-19, the protocol for online site visits is used to continue with the review according to the agreed timeline.

Agencies undergoing their first review against the ESG should try to hold a physical site visit. Should this not be possible, the online site visit can be considered in agreement with the review panellists.

Importantly, each review and the implementation of the online site visit need to be considered, within the generic parameters of this document, for its specific case and in discussion and agreement with the panel members.

The objectives of an online site visit remain the same as for the on-site visit to an agency under review (see chapter 6.1 of the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews):

“The site visit has a number of key objectives:

1. to enable the review panel to share the impressions gained from the SAR;
2. to explore the agency’s compliance with the ESG during meetings and interviews with the key bodies and individuals at the agency;
3. to engage in a developmental dialogue with the agency on its operations, strategy, challenges, and good practice in relation to the ESG;
4. to explore the agency’s compliance with the ESG through additional documentation;
5. to formulate the panel’s preliminary findings regarding compliance with the ESG and communicate these to the agency; and
6. to produce material for the draft report as a solid basis for further development after the site visit.” (p. 19)

The reconceptualisation of a site visit for its online provision is built primarily to strengthen points 2 and 6 of the listed objectives. All other elements of a site visit that are not addressed in this protocol

should follow the well-established procedures for a site visit as elaborated in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews.

The following points should be considered in the implementation of online site visits:

1. Technical and general aspects of an online site visit (check of internet connection, time zones, meeting room, verification of attendees, attendance)

Prior to the online site visit, an online meeting is organised between the review coordinator and the agency to check the stability of internet connection. The same is done between the review coordinator and the review panellists during their briefing call.

In addition to the regular items of the panel's briefing call, such a call is used to discuss what is the best time to start the online site visit due to possible different time zones of panellists.

The online site visit is organised in one e-meeting room but following a careful consideration that the panel's private discussions are held only after the participants have left the room. All attendees of the online site visit are verified by the review coordinator. For this purpose, all attendees briefly introduce themselves to the panel.

The panellists are required to assign time in the evenings for further private panel discussions.

2. Issues of confidentiality (use of a secure tool for online meetings, recordings of sessions)

The meeting platform is hosted and managed by ENQA, with the coordinator being present throughout the online site visit. The meeting room should always be secured with the meeting ID and a password.

The online site visit is not recorded.

3. Preparatory work for an online site visit (use of an online meeting with the agency's resource person, the mapping grid)

The Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews already request from the panel to organise an online meeting with the 'agency resource person' well before the site visit. Such a meeting helps the panel reach a sufficient understanding of the specific national/legal context in which an agency operates, and of the specific quality assurance system to which it belongs. Moreover, such a meeting helps the panel to achieve a good understanding of factual matters ahead of the actual site-visit, enabling them to use the full time during the interview sessions of the site visit for the key purposes of the review process.

The online meeting with the agency's resource person (and the panel's private meetings related to this, i.e., day 0 of the ENQA Agency Review draft schedule) is organised ideally two weeks before the start of the site visit to 1) give the agency resource person time to check/supply any additional or missing information 2) and for the panel to adjust their interview plans/questions based on the information received.

The mapping grid exercise is carefully approached and fully used by the review panel to map all missing data (see the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews).

4. Efficient and effective time management during an online site visit (length and hybrid mode of the site visit, use of interpreter)

Rather than using the usual schedule for the on-site visit to the agency, as prescribed in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, the schedule for an online site visit is reconceptualised to fully accommodate the characteristics of an online environment (e.g., time for discussion, use of e-tools). Nevertheless, as requested in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, a site visit should be used “to reflect on and fully validate the information contained in the SAR, as well as to clarify any additional points” (p. 19).

For the purposes of an online site visit, the review panel carefully adapts the time used for collection of data. Instead of using several meetings to collect data that are missing for a comprehensive understanding of the agency’s functioning, the online site visit should be used to focus on fully validating the collected information (e.g., through triangulation) and reflect on collected data between the panellists and with the agency staff. Nevertheless, as experience shows that the additional obtaining of data is in most cases still needed during the site visit, an online pre-meeting is organised between the agency resource person and the panel to obtain most missing information in this regard (see point 3 above).

Furthermore, the length of the site visit that is currently limited to two and a half day in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is reconsidered to:

- accommodate sufficient time for the panel’s private discussions (previous coffee breaks and evening sessions)
- provide a sufficient break for panel members during each day of the online site visit (e.g., sufficient time for lunch break)
- incorporate time needed to manage the online environment (i.e., logging in to the sessions, turning on the microphones).

The online site visit is thus organised in agreement with the review panel and the agency in two and a half day (by prolonging the working hours per day as shown in annex I), in three full days (by prolonging the time of a site visit but keeping the working hours per day reasonable) or alternatively a free day is introduced in between the two full days to support reflection and rest of the panel.

The online site visit can be organised in a hybrid manner, which means that the panel members would meet in one of their countries or the country of a review coordinator, should it not be possible to travel to the country of the agency, but it is still possible to travel between the countries of panel members. Such approach facilitates the panel’s private discussions and reduces challenges related to many people logging to the e-meeting room at the same time.

An interpreter is hired by the agency as usual, though it is strongly encouraged to select those interviewees that speak English (whenever possible and only if not compromising the data collection process). If this is not possible, time for such sessions should be increased accordingly.

The planning schedule for the online site visits is presented in annex I and may be helpful in setting up the preliminary programme.

5. Interviews with persons as requested by the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews

It is advised to set a maximum number of interviewees per session to seven to enable sufficient time for discussion with each involved person.

The roles of panel members should be clearly defined between themselves for each session before it actually starts, and then thoroughly followed.

6. Reporting

The external review report clearly states that the site visit was conducted in an online manner and the panel members agreed to this.

Adopted by the ENQA Board on 18 June 2020 and revised on 10 December 2020 and 10 May 2021.

Annexes

Annex 1: draft programme of an online site visit (with changes to the programme of the on-site visit marked in italics)

[DD.MM.YYYY] - ONLINE MEETING WITH THE AGENCY'S RESOURCE PERSON [ORGANISED IDEALLY TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE SITE VISIT]				
SESSION No.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
1	120 min (e.g., start at 13.00)	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit		
2	90 min	An online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person regarding the specific national/legal context in which an agency operates, specific quality assurance system to which it belongs and key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities		

[DD.MM.YYYY] - DAY 0 (PRE-VISIT) [AS NECESSARY]				
SESSION No.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
3	60 min	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day 1		
4	As necessary	A pre-visit meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify any remaining questions after the online clarifications meeting		

[DD.MM.YYYY] - DAY 1				
SESSION No.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
	30 min (e.g., start at 9.00)	Review panel's private meeting		

	5 min	Connection set-up		
5	45 min	Meeting with the CEO and the chair of the Board (or equivalent)		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
6	45 min	Meeting with the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
7	45 min	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team		
	60 min (start at 12.30)	Lunch break		
	60 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
8	45 min	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of external QA activities		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
9	45 min	Meeting with department/key body of the agency 1		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
10	45 min (end 17.30)	Meeting with department/key body of the agency 2		
	As needed	Break		

11	60 min (an evening session)	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day II		
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[DD.MM.YYYY] – Day 2				
SESSION No.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
	60 min (e.g. start at 9.00)	Review panel private meeting		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
12	45 min	Meeting with ministry representatives (where relevant)		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
13	45 min	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/HEI representatives		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
14	45 min	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs		
	60 min (start at 13.00)	Lunch break		
	60 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
15	45 min	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		

16	45 min	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employers, students, local community		
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
17	45 min (end 18.00)	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employers, students, local community		
	As needed	Break		
18	60 min. or as necessary (an evening session)	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day III and provisional conclusions		

[DD.MM.YYYY] – Day 3				
SESSION No.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
	15 min	Connection set-up		
19	60 min (e.g., start at 9.00)	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify		
	5 min	Connection set-up		
20	60 min	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues		
21	90 min	Private meeting among panel members to agree on the main findings		
	60 min (start of lunch 12.35)	Lunch break		
	5 minutes	Connection set-up		

22	30 min	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings		
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