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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 2.3 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 "substantial compliance", not rigid adherence." (p. 4)

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, with one minor adaptation to 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, ~~face-to-face~~, the impressions gained from the SAR;
2. to explore the agency's compliance with the ESG during meetings and interviews with the key individuals at the agency under review;
3. to explore the agency's compliance with the ESG through additional documentation;
4. to engage in a dialogue with the agency on its operations and ESG compliance;
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. 13)

The reconceptualisation of a site visit for its online provision is built primarily to strengthen points 3 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, verification of attendees, two meeting rooms, 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 a pre-meeting with the agency's resource person, the mapping grid)**

The Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews already provide the possibility for the panel to use "an agency's resource person" in order to reach a sufficient understanding of the specific national/legal context in which an agency operates, or of the specific quality assurance system to which it belongs. For the purposes of online site visits, the meetings with such resource person(s) are expanded beyond learning about the agency's context and include the factual check exercise.

The pre-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 few days before the start of the actual site visit to 1) give the 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 Annex 3 of 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 translator)

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 points at issue" (p. 13).

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)
- 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 1), 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.

Translator 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 1 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.

Annexes

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

DAY 0 *(SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED FEW DAYS BEFORE DAY 1)*				
TIMING	**TOPIC**	**PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW**	**ISSUES TO BE DISCUSSED**	**LEAD PANEL MEMBER**
15 minutes	*Checking the stability of internet connection (review coordinator and the agency's contact person)*			
120 minutes E.g. start at 13.00	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for day 1			
120 minutes End at 17.00	A pre-visit meeting with the agency contact person to clarify elements related to the overall system and context. *The meeting should be expanded beyond learning about the agency's context and include the factual check exercise*			

DAY 1				
TIMING	**TOPIC**	**PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW**	**ISSUES TO BE DISCUSSED**	**LEAD PANEL MEMBER**
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			
30 minutes E.g. start at 9.00	Review panel's private meeting			
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			
45 minutes	Meeting with the CEO and the chair of the Board (or equivalent)			
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			
45 minutes	Meeting with the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report			
30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team			

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30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
60 minutes Start at 13.15	*Lunch break*			
60 minutes	*Review panel's private discussion*			
45 minutes	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of evaluations			
30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes	Meeting with department/key body of the agency 1			
30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes End 18.30	Meeting with department/key body of the agency 2			
	Break			
As necessary *(an evening session)*	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day II			

Day 2				
Timing	**Topic**	**Persons for interview**	**Issues to be discussed**	**Lead panel member**
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			
30 minutes E.g. start at 9.00	Review panel private meeting			
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			
45 minutes	Meeting with ministry representatives (where relevant)			

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30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/HEI representatives			
30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs			
60 minutes Start at 13.00	*Lunch break*			
60 minutes (a longer session)	*Review panel's private discussion (and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool			
30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employer representatives, students, local community…			
30 minutes	Review panel's private discussion *(and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
45 minutes End 18.15	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employer representatives, students, local community…			
	Break			
As necessary *(an evening session)*	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day III and provisional conclusions			

Day 3				
Timing	**Topic**	**Persons for interview**	**Issues to be discussed**	**Lead panel member**
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			

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60 minutes E.g. start at 9.00	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify			
15 minutes	*Connection set-up*			
60 minutes	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues			
90 minutes	Private meeting among panel members to agree on the main findings			
60 minutes Start of lunch 12.45	*Lunch break (and connection set-up for the coordinator)*			
60 minutes	Final de-briefing meeting with *key* staff and Council/Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings			